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"Alex brings tears to my eyes for different reasons."

Marco Vittur. Newsstand cover: Brian Bowen Smith/Paramount

EMPIRE
WELCOME

"THE SLOWER WE move, the faster we die," intoned George Clooney's Ryan Bingham in *Up In The Air*. Being an air-mile-loving corporate fixer, he wasn't talking literal life and death. But in *The Running Man*, speed is your only protection against an actual, head-splatting, body-exploding fatality. Well, that and cunning. And, very possibly, looking like Glen Powell.

Stephen King cooked up the wild sci-fi story, about a futuristic gameshow in which regular folk are hunted down by lethal bounty hunters, back in 1982. It got Arnie-ized five years later, in a movie in which Schwarzenegger yelled, "If you guys don't shut up, I'm gonna uplink your ass!" Now, it's getting revived again, in time to make *Squid Game* look like *Challenge Anneka*. Behind the camera: Edgar Wright, a filmmaker who has always moved at high velocity. In front of it: rising star and charisma machine Powell, heading up an action movie for the first time. Consider me excited. Head to page 48 — quick as you can — for a set report from Chris Hewitt, our very own Writing Man.

That's The Running Man. But how about The Directing Actor? For our latest in-depth Q&A and photoshoot, we dispatched Beth Webb to spend a day with Harris Dickinson, the buzzy British star who's now moving into filmmaking with his drama *Urchin*. He gave a fascinating, thoughtful interview, dispensed one hell of a goat-based analogy, and even teased his monumental upcoming turn as John Lennon in Sam Mendes' Beatles movies. Rejected headline for this feature: 'He Said He Said'.

And finally, The Caving Women. Last summer, as part of our movie-marathon

all-nighter at London's Picturehouse Central, we screened gruelling subterranean horror *The Descent* at 2am. Amazingly, everyone survived. And now, to celebrate the British classic's 20th birthday, we reunite its all-female cast, plus director Neil Marshall, to tell the tale of how they faced cavern-Gollums and verrrry tight spaces, and prevailed. Best read in broad daylight.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Murugiah
A multi-disciplinary artist, illustrator and designer based in London, Murugiah has produced work for Marvel, Warner Bros., the V&A Museum and Picturehouse. Go to murugiah.com to see more of his work.

TURN TO PAGE 32 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION*

* Please note that your first issue may not be the cover displayed

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

CHRIS HEWITT WENT ON THE SET OF *THE RUNNING MAN*

"I ran all the way to Bulgaria to sit down with our cover star, Glen Powell, while he was making Edgar Wright's *The Running Man.* He's a very engaging fellow, that Powell. He'll go far. Shortly after this picture was taken, one of us jumped off a bridge. To find out who, turn to page 48."

BETH WEBB SPOKE TO HARRIS DICKINSON

"It was a real pleasure to speak with an imminent Beatle about goats in his native East London. And it was very on-brand for him to bring a Criterion Collection tote along for the day. (For the record, his Criterion Closet picks are well worth seeking out!)"

HARRY STAINER COVERED EMPIRE VIP'S *NAKED GUN* SCREENING

"Long live the big-screen comedy! At Empire's VIP screening, *The Naked Gun* packed the house and promptly brought it down with laughter. Pamela Anderson and Liam Neeson came along, with Neeson wryly 'reminding' readers he only did the film for one reason: the money."

Ross Ferguson, Craig Gibson. Spinelines issue 444: Newsstand: "The flames of my evil burn bright. Now you say something cool back at me" is from *Megamind*. Subs: "Your avatar is a zoologist" is from *Jumanji: The Next Level*

DIRECTORS SPILL THE BEANS ON THE YEAR'S HOTTEST MOVIES

SUPERMAN
James Gunn
on *that*
parental twist

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING
Christopher McQuarrie
on *that* plane stunt

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F1
Joseph Kosinski
on *that*
final race

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH
Gareth Edwards
on *that* showdown

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COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

THIS TIME, IT'S WEDDING

Hi, guys. Avid *Empire* reader (21 years and counting) and massive *Alien* fan. I attended the London premiere of the *Aliens Expanded* documentary last year and would like to share a picture of a very happy me and Bill Hope. In my infinite wisdom and adoration, I did indeed call him an "asshole, Gorman" and he giggled. Top bloke. Anyway, I am getting married in November and would be mostly ecstatic to be included in the mag as an early wedding gift please. Mostly.

PENNY GLEN, VIA EMAIL

Congrats, Penny! For both your impending nuptials and meeting Lieutenant Gorman in the flesh. Please accept a Picturehouse membership as our wedding gift. Hope you have a glorious day in the Corps.

Picturehouse *Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks.

ON PEDRO PASCAL'S ROLE IN TONY GILROY'S NEW FILM:
Oh, I hope this happens, I haven't seen Pedro in anything for ages. I thought he had retired!
KEITH HEENEY

NICK KNACK

Any plans for a full Nick Offerman interview? After his fascinating, eloquent and hilarious Pint Of Milk interview [issue #443] — and what an answer to that question! — I would love to read more of his thoughts about life.

DEZ BREWSTER, VIA EMAIL

Nick Offerman's Pint Of Milk is already considered a classic of the genre. And with good reason. He's Ron Fuckin' Swanson.

ON STEVEN KNIGHT WRITING THE NEXT 007 FILM:
The twist: the new Bond will take place inside a hacked fishing simulator made by his son.
@FILMBRAINBMB.BSKY.SOCIAL

TOOTH HURTY

Just saw *Bring Her Back* and want to applaud the Philippou brothers for the worst bit of dental destruction on celluloid since *Marathon Man*. I could not bear to watch the 'Huge Knife In Gob' scene. I've an appointment at the dentist this afternoon. Just the thought of it is unnerving.

PHIL SLOAN, BEXLEY VILLAGE

Brace yourself, Phil!

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHO WOULD BE YOUR DREAM CASTING FOR THE NEW X-MEN?

My really big wish is that Dafne Keen reprises her role as Laura, and she becomes 616's main — and only — Wolverine.
@DTHESLOP.BSKY.SOCIAL

Stanley Tucci as Professor X.
@SDTWELVE.BSKY.SOCIAL

I got it into my head a few years ago that Denzel Washington would be an amazing Magneto and David Oyelowo a great Professor X.
@DANIELTHEW.BSKY.SOCIAL

A singer as Dazzler might be obvious and Taylor Swift has long been the traditional fan casting, but for a different take, how about Chappell Roan?
@CRAIGOXBROW.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

HOT FUZZ ACTION SPECIAL MARCH 2007

Edgar Wright — whose latest, *The Running Man*, is our cover film — goes back a long way with *Empire*. A self-described "avid reader since Issue 1", he is the rare director to enjoy cover-star status (October 2021, fact fans). And back in 2007, to mark the release of *Hot Fuzz*, we enlisted Wright and his Cornetto cohorts Simon Pegg and Nick Frost to talk about their favourite action movies.

Wright offered some deep cuts, from the car chase in 1974's *Freebie And The Bean* to 2004's *Torque*, "the motorcycle version of *The Fast And The Furious*", as well as his emotional reaction to the Jackie Chan classic *Rumble In The Bronx*. "I was reduced to man-tears," he said. "My girlfriend at the time was completely perplexed."

Alamy, Penelope Glen

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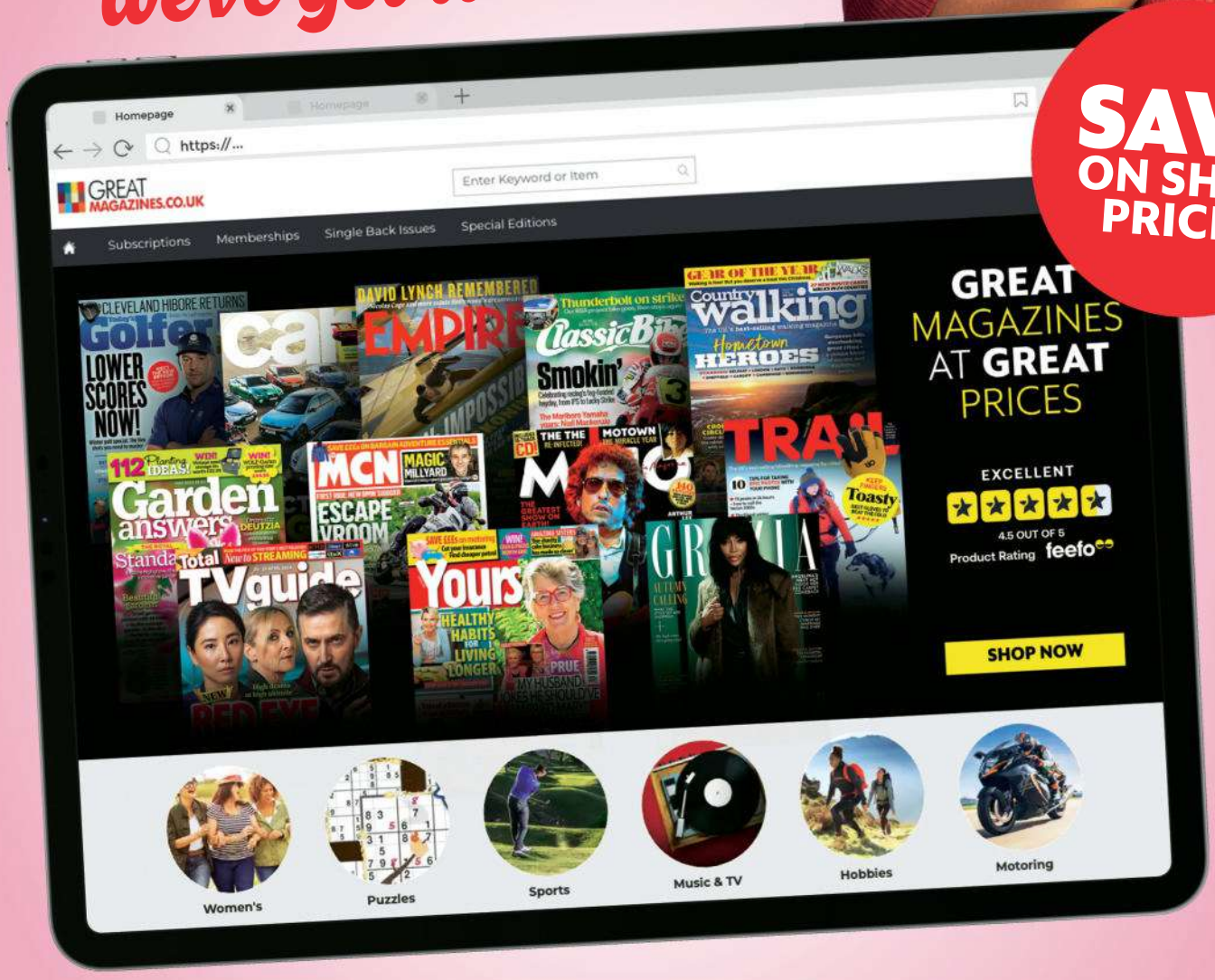

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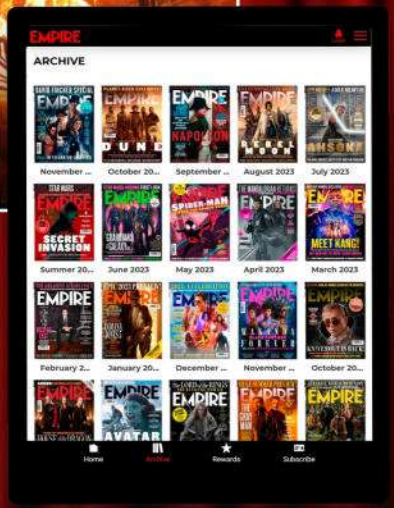

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

OCTOBER 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

Hello, yellow brick road

JON M. CHU ON FOLLOWING UP HIS EMERALD SUCCESS WITH DEEPER, DARKER SEQUEL **WICKED: FOR GOOD**

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA**

"PEOPLE'S KNIVES WERE out, ready to cut us if we destroyed something they love," director Jon M. Chu says of 2024's *Wicked: Part One*. But the film, based on the first act of Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman's hit stage show, instead became the highest-grossing musical adaptation of all time (making over $756 million worldwide) and won two of its ten Oscar nominations, for costume and production design. The knives, it seems, were retracted. "I don't think any of us could have imagined the groundswell of love and support for the movie, the performances; for every department, really," Chu says.

This November, he'll wrap up the story of Cynthia Erivo's Elphaba and her best frenemy, Ariana Grande's Glinda, in *For Good*. The reception to *Part One* both gives Chu confidence and adds pressure to live up to that benchmark. The films were shot back-to-back, almost two-and-a-half years ago now, after Chu argued that the screen adaptation should break the stage show in half. The director had a rough edit of this second part before the first was released, to give him a sense of how everything fitted together. But seeing the reaction to *Part One* has allowed him to tweak his choices and lean into what worked, trusting that the audience will pick up on small details and invest in his characters' stories. "It sets the bar higher for part two," Chu explains. "We know our audience much more than we did, and that allowed us a little bit of freedom."

For those who haven't been paying attention, the musical is based on Gregory Maguire's book, itself a prequel to Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard Of Oz*. It's the story of how a green-skinned girl called Elphaba became the Wicked Witch Of The West, while her blonde college roommate Galinda became 'Glinda the Good'. Crucially, it reveals that neither of those descriptions is quite accurate. While part one depicted the unlikely friends finding common ground when thrust together at university, this second half sees the pair as adults, pitted on opposite sides of the fight for Oz's future. "I love that people get to see the full masterplan, and the full scope of what Cynthia and Ariana do in this movie," grins Chu. "I'm so happy they were appreciated in the first one, but movie two is where the meat comes out."

The last film ended with Elphaba's spectacular, literally show-stopping number 'Defying Gravity'. More pertinently, she defied the Wizard Of Oz (Jeff Goldblum) with a sudden burst of extraordinary magic. She left her friends, family and home to raise a rebellion and save Oz — especially its downtrodden talking-animal population — from the Wizard's manipulations. The good news? She can fly ("like a Marvel superhero," says Chu). The bad news is the whole world has turned against her, which is what gives this second film its dramatic heft.

"The stakes are higher than ever for Elphaba," explains Chu. "She's fighting to expose the Wizard, but she's alone in that. Can one person actually make a difference? She's up

Clockwise from main: Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) goes it alone on the yellow brick road; A frank face-to-face with Glinda (Ariana Grande); Director Jon M. Chu gives direction on set.

against the Wizard's propaganda, calling her the Wicked Witch, talking about how her skin is green and her soul is impure. What happens when the home you believed in doesn't want you anymore? Is it worth defending? Why stay?" For a film shot years ago, based on a decades-old stage show and even older world, it's a strikingly contemporary dilemma.

This film will also bring in familiar elements from the original *The Wizard Of Oz*: most notably, the iconic yellow brick road travelled by Dorothy and her friends, whose adventures parallel this part of Elphaba and Glinda's lives. That callback intensifies audience expectation even more for Chu and his cast — as shown by the recent backlash against a digitally-restored, AI-enhanced version of the 1939 classic being screened at the immersive Sphere in Las Vegas, people still have strong feelings about that movie. "It's testament to the power of cinema, when it speaks to so many generations," Chu says. "It felt like, 'How did we get here? How are we responsible for this iconography right now?' It pushed us to be even better."

As he fine-tunes the film, overseeing scoring in London and the last bits of visual effects, the hype for *For Good* continues to build. Here's hoping that, to paraphrase the titular song, it leaves him — and this beloved cinematic world — changed for the better.

***WICKED: FOR GOOD* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 21**

The branded blockbuster is here

HOW HOLLYWOOD PUSHED PRODUCT PLACEMENT TO NEW LEVELS THIS SUMMER

WORDS **AL HORNER**

PETER PARKER WEB-SLINGS back into his Brooklyn apartment after battling Doctor Doom in *Avengers: Doomsday*. Looking to relax, he sits down to read a copy of *Empire*. "You'd be looking at as much as half a million dollars for that, for just a few seconds' screentime," suggests Matt Bonin, managing partner at US ad agency Alto, and an expert in all things product placement. At the other end of the financial scale, "If you were integrated into the storyline, or wanted multiple verbal mentions... something like that could easily pass $5 million." Welcome to the booming business of "brand integrations".

This summer saw Amazon products flood the Ice Cube-fronted *War Of The Worlds*, while Capri-Suns were sipped in *Lilo & Stitch*. It has ignited new debate about whether the practice is getting out of hand. *Jurassic World Rebirth* even featured the unexpected sight of a Snickers wrapper leading directly to a person's death. "Confectionery companies like seeing their product in major motion pictures. [They even want] their wrappers to be the reason for the downfall of humanity," director Gareth Edwards tells *Empire*. He did shoot a version of the scene where the camera followed the wind-blown wrapper around the laboratory which opens the film, but "it looked like such an obscene advert for Snickers that I couldn't do it".

F1, meanwhile, raised a record-breaking $40 million in commercial deals by allowing brands to sponsor its fictional racing team. Among them was software company Expensify, their main sponsor in the story. For Ryan Schaffer, Expensify's executive director, the move was a risk. "[I'd] been extremely nervous for a very long time," he laughs, having had to commit a huge fee — the company's entire annual marketing budget — upfront years in advance, on a project delayed by Covid and the writers' strike. But he was attracted to how organic this product placement would be versus jarring examples that can cause "negative sentiment, because they're distracting from the movie", he explains. "The nature of F1 is that the sponsors are a big part of it. They're plastered all over it in a way unlike any other sport. So, the team in the movie would actually have looked weird if they didn't have sponsor logos."

The stress was worth it for them — Expensify has had a huge uptick in web traffic because of the film, he says, and star Damson Idris even wore an outfit emblazoned with its logo to the Met Gala in May. But what are studios getting out of it, when critics warn that product placement done badly can take audiences out of a movie, and cheapen the theatre-going experience?

Simple, answers Matthew Rotondo, head of brands at Sugar23: the chance to get projects made, in a challenging time for Hollywood. "It's so expensive now to make movies, and recouping investment [at the box office] is less guaranteed than ever. So it makes a lot of sense to look for organic ways to partner with brands."

Rotondo doesn't just forecast product placement to continue increasing in films. He sees a world in which "Coca-Cola is associated with Christmas, so they're the company that goes out and makes the next *Elf*". Never mind chaos-unleashing Snickers wrappers. The real impending rebirth might be how products shape the movies we watch.

Top to bottom: *F1*: Joshua Pearce (Damson Idris) with the logo of real-life sponsor Expensify; Also seen in his racing car; *Lilo & Stitch*'s Lilo (Maia Kealoha) drinks a Capri-Sun.

HOW TO (FALSELY) RECREATE AN ICONIC COLLAB

JIM HOSKING REWRITES A HISTORIC MUSICAL UNION WITH BIZARRE BALLS-OUT COMEDY EBONY & IVORY

MOST MUSIC BIOPICS proudly trumpet their accuracy. But on *Ebony & Ivory* — the third film from Jim Hosking, the absurdist director behind *The Greasy Strangler* — inaccuracy was the rule. It's a wildly fictionalised retelling of the making of 'Ebony And Ivory', the 1982 ballad about racial harmony from Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder — played here by Hosking regulars Sky Elobar and Gil Gex, who by Hosking's admission look "too old, too wonky, too wrong" for the roles. He tells *Empire* how he forged their duet his way.

SMOKE A DOOBIE WOOBIE

"Obviously, I did no research whatsoever," says Hosking. But there are just enough crumbs of reality for the characters to feel recognisable — including a disgusting approximation of Linda McCartney's vegetarian food, and Paul McCartney's love of marijuana, or a "doobie woobie", as it's called in the film. It leads to a lengthy sequence in which Stevie gets the spins and hallucinates his parents repeating the phrase, "You are most definitely not alone." "There's something quite fascinating about repeating a line," says Hosking. "You go from a soothing, comforting, nurturing, parental place to a comedic place, to a darker, stranger place."

The stuff legends are made of: Paul (Sky Elobar) and Stevie (Gil Gex). **Below:** Naked attraction.

SWIM NAKED IN THE SEA

Having warmed to each other, Paul and Stevie at one point strip naked, do a crab dance on the beach, and swim in the sea. As with his previous work, Hosking deployed prosthetic penises for his actors. "I use this guy in America who is meant to be the greatest prosthetic-penis-manufacturer in the business," he explains. "He sent me this very detailed PDF of penises: penis shapes, colours, circumcised, uncircumcised, lengths. This is not a comment on my own manhood, but his penises seem to be a lot bigger per inch than I expected them to be."

ENCOUNTER SOME SHEEP AVATARS

During their journey, our heroes come across some sheep who bear a striking resemblance to them: a white sheep and a black sheep. "Early on, I was thinking they had to have some kind of epiphany to come up with the idea for the song," Hosking says. The pair ultimately end up baa-ing at sheep that look exactly like them (also played by Elobar and Gex, in full-body costumes). "There had been talk about potentially having the film sponsored by the British Wool Marketing Board," he notes. "That could have been a really valuable tie-in opportunity." You might even say they would have gone together in perfect harmony. **JOHN NUGENT**

EBONY & IVORY IS IN CINEMAS FROM SEPTEMBER 19

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE STRANGE BRAINS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

NICK DE SEMLYEN IS THINKING ABOUT... A COSMIC CONNECTION

George Lucas did a panel at San Diego Comic-Con for the first time ever this year, moderated by… Queen Latifah? I've spent weeks pondering why. Is Lucas a fan of *Taxi*? Did autocorrect change 'Queen Amidala' to 'Queen Latifah' in an email at some point? I need answers!

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... RYAN GOSLING'S GUY MOVIES

We get it Gosling, you're a guy. You've been a Fall Guy, a Nice Guy and now you're joining Will Ferrell as a Tough Guy. Don't get me started on you being a Gray *and* First Man. It's time to shake things up a bit!

ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... A BIG-SCREEN BLOBFISH

Can somebody please tell me why *nobody* has ever made an animated feature about a blobfish? It has a cartoon face! There's an epic waiting to happen about this maudlin, loveable creature finding underwater happiness. Come on, Pixar, it's money in the bank!

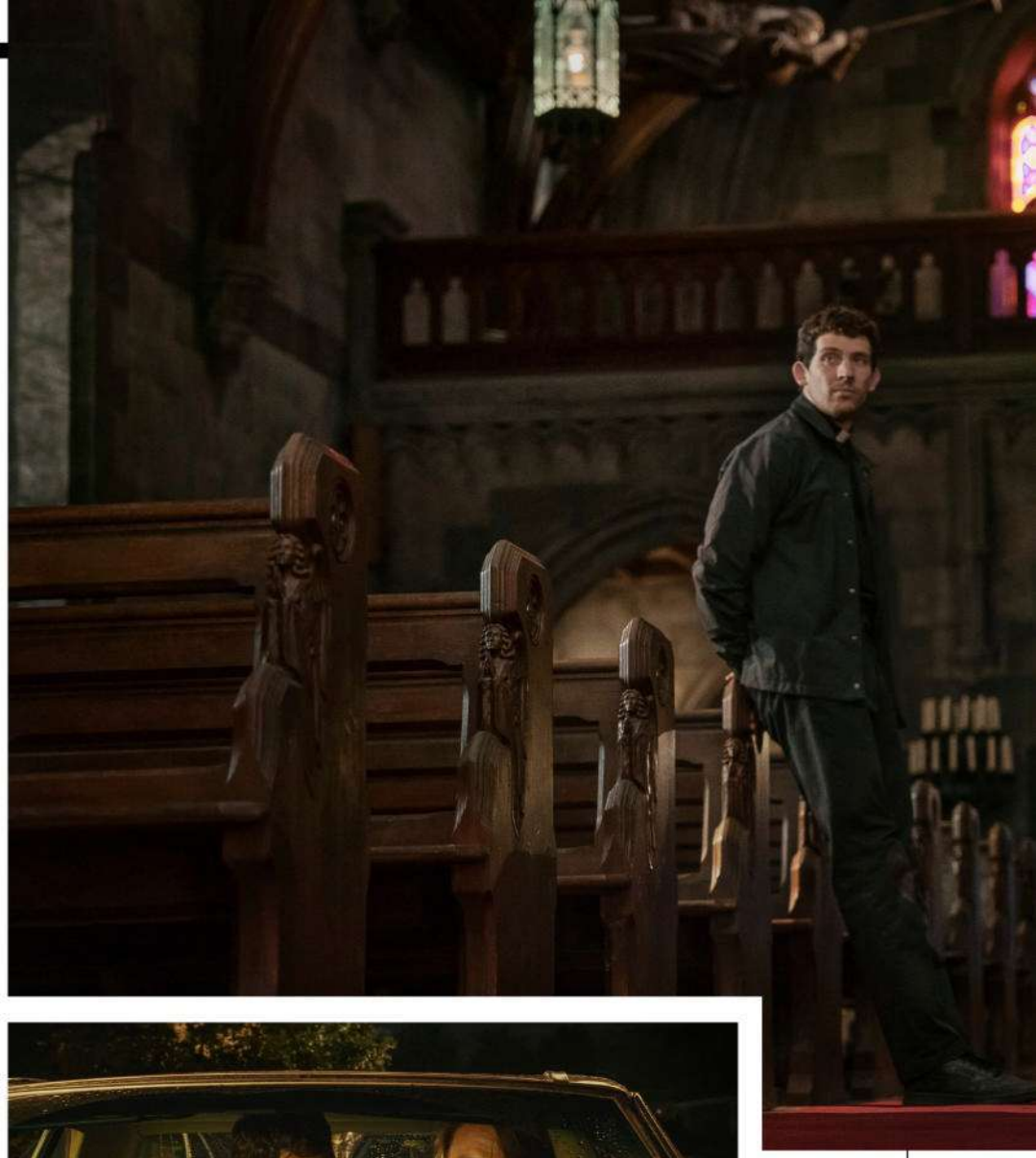
Marco Vittur

Benoit Blanc gets biblical

RIAN JOHNSON DELIVERS VITAL CLUES ABOUT WAKE UP DEAD MAN, HIS THIRD *KNIVES OUT* MYSTERY

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

YOUR CINEMATIC PRAYERS are answered: Benoit Blanc is back! After solving a familial murder in *Knives Out* and exposing a super-rich dummy in *Glass Onion*, Daniel Craig's Southern-drawling detective returns to unspool another whodunnit in *Wake Up Dead Man* — a twisted, deadlier, church-themed mystery. With the film opening the BFI London Film Festival this October, writer-director Rian Johnson takes *Empire* inside his latest crime scene.



Top to bottom: Father Jud (Josh O'Connor) and Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig); "I said take the B523!"; Director Rian Johnson.

A DARK TURN

Following the sun-drenched, Greek island-set *Glass Onion*, *Wake Up Dead Man* returns to the shadows. "It's Gothic in its tone," Johnson says. "It's going back to the real origins of the [mystery] genre, which are Edgar Allan Poe, *Murders In The Rue Morgue.*" As well as the detective stories of G. K. Chesterton and John Dickson Carr, Johnson cites tonal inspiration in early James Whale horror, author Washington Irvine (*Wake Up Dead Man* is set in the Hudson Valley, upstate New York, near Sleepy Hollow), and *The Banshees Of Inisherin*. "[Martin] McDonagh is so amazing in the way that he focuses on this tight group of characters," he says. "It's so rich and unexpected." Yet despite the many devilish influences on the film, don't expect too many nightmares. "It's still a Benoit Blanc movie," Johnson assures us. "It still has a lot of humour in it."

A FAITHFUL FIGURE

This time, Blanc is stepping on holy ground. "It's centred around the church, and all the suspects are regulars in the parish," says Johnson. That includes the film's protagonist, Josh O'Connor's Father Jud, who takes on the Ana de Armas/Janelle Monáe role of Blanc's sidekick. "He ends up partnering with Blanc on solving this mystery; it's very much his journey," the director confirms. The smalltown politics and religious explorations of the film let him enter "a great tradition in the history of the whodunnit: the clerical mystery". See Agatha Christie's *Murder At The Vicarage*, or Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries. "He [Chesterton] takes the form of the whodunnit, and the consequence of having Father Brown — this kind of moral compass — at the centre of it, and brings those two things together in a way that serves both ends," explains Johnson. Believe.

A PIOUS PUZZLE

Having John Dickson Carr as a touchstone means a real brainteaser is incoming. "He specialised in impossible crime stories, little logic puzzles," explains Johnson. "The locked-door mystery is one of them — somebody is found dead in a room that's locked, with no entrances or exits. It's completely impossible." Here, the conundrum that Benoit and Father Jud face has seemingly divine implications. "Blanc is seeing it as, 'It's just a murder, I can solve this.' The way the murder presents itself is the opposite of that. It's framed as an

impossible thing that could never have happened, almost miraculous in nature. And Blanc as the rationalist is coming in to do what he does, and prove that wrong." Crucifixes at the ready.

A BLANC SLATE

While the Southern sleuth is the doughnut hole of every *Knives Out* film — central, and yet also not — this time Blanc will be a less passive observer of the truth. "He has the biggest personal journey in this one," teases Johnson. Partly that's down to the religious angle. "Benoit has to engage with [the mystery] in a different way," he says. "He's in a very different place than in the previous two films. Daniel and I had a lot of fun thinking about where Blanc is at in his life. And I think he's going through some shit!" He's still dressing sharply, though. "I think he looks the best in [*Dead Man*], out of all three movies," says Johnson of the new long-hair-and-tweed get-up. "The suits that he wears in this one are *so* gorgeous. They have an almost '70s tailoring to them. He maintains a degree of sartorial elegance, but in a completely different mode." There will be murder, then — but no crimes against fashion.

WAKE UP DEAD MAN: A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY **OPENS THE BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL ON OCTOBER 8 AND IS ON NETFLIX FROM DECEMBER 12**

Getty Images, Marco Vittur

THE PLATFORM

"The darker the times, the more important to have comedy as an escape valve"

NICK DE SEMLYEN ON WHY *THE NAKED GUN* GIVES HIM HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF SILLY FILMS

IN ALL HONESTY, I did not expect that a highlight of a recent weekend would be witnessing Pamela Anderson use a samurai sword to slice off the head of a marauding voodoo snowman. Yet such was the case, thanks to one especially silly riff in the recent *The Naked Gun* reboot. It would have made me laugh wherever I saw it. But I doubt I would have laughed quite so much if I hadn't been in a room full of equally tickled people, aka Screen 3 at the Muswell Hill Everyman. Special shout-out to the gentleman sitting in front of me, who erupted in a contagious chortle at the sight of Liam Neeson's Frank Drebin Jr eating an adversary's gun in the film's opening minutes, and didn't stop from there.

"The sound of laughter is like the vaulted dome of a temple of happiness," wrote novelist Milan Kundera once. Or, as Roger Ebert put it in his review of the original *The Naked Gun* back in 1988: "You laugh, and then you laugh at yourself for laughing." Even the most cerebral people need to cut loose sometimes: Christopher Nolan is a noted *MacGruber* stan, while Terrence Malick adores *Zoolander*. And the darker the times we live in, the more important it is for us to have communal comedy as an escape valve — just watch Preston Sturges classic *Sullivan's Travels* if you want to see that point made with crystal clarity. Yet my experience watching *The Naked Gun* with a crowd felt like something rare, a barely recalled experience from the past. Something Seth MacFarlane, a producer on the film, alluded to when he intro'd a screening in LA: "For those of you who don't remember the original *The Naked Gun*, there used to be these movies called comedies. It's been so long since one came out that Paramount asked me to explain to you that it's supposed to be funny, just so you're not confused."

Comedies are still being made and even hitting big on streaming. As I write this, *Happy Gilmore 2* is #1 on Netflix's most-watched chart, on paper a LOL-in-one. But my experience watching that shortly after *The Naked Gun* was very different: no contagious chortles, no sense of a shared experience, several interruptions from a dive-bombing cat. It's frankly just not the same. So my hope is that a trouserless Liam Neeson will prove to be the unlikely herald of a new wave of funny movies made for cinemas. There's serious money to be made in giggles, after all, as the likes of *Bridesmaids*, *The Hangover* and most recently *Barbie* have amply proven. To paraphrase Frank Drebin Jr, big-screen comedy could once again be electric, like eels, chairs and Catherine Zeta-Jones in *Chicago*.

MI5's unstoppable misfits return

SLOW HORSES' HIGH STAKES AND SHAMBOLIC SPIES HAVE LED TO APPLE TV+'S LONGEST-RUNNING SHOW

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

IT WAS IN *Slow Horses'* third season that showrunner Will Smith — Emmy-winning writer, not Oscar-ruining actor — realised the spy series had become a smash. With a plot centred on a hostage rescue, it dialled everything up: more explosive action, twistier plotting, funnier gags (Smith is ex-*Veep* and *The Thick Of It*). The cult hit had reached a tipping point. "It just felt like a bigger show," says Smith. "That's when I no longer had to explain it to people... I remember renewing my car insurance and [telling the person] my job was, 'Writer, *Slow Horses*.' 'OH MY GOD, DO YOU KNOW GARY OLDMAN?!'"

Slow Horses is now heading into its fifth season, making it Apple TV+'s longest-running show, and it's more popular than ever. Based on a novel series by Mick Herron, it follows the

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

SPIDER-PUNK

Daniel Kaluuya is co-writing a *Spider-Verse* spin-off movie for Sony Pictures Animation. The project will give the Kaluuya-voiced character — a Camden-based, anti-establishment, mohawk-rocking Spidey variant introduced in *Across The Spider-Verse* — his first solo big-screen outing.

ATTACK OF THE 50 FT. WOMAN

Margot Robbie is already a huge star — but she may be about to get even bigger, in the most literal sense. The *Barbie* actor is circling the *kaiju*-sized lead role in Tim Burton's upcoming remake of the 1950s B-movie classic about, well, the attack of the 50-foot woman.

HIGH SIDE

A Complete Unknown director-star duo James Mangold and **Timothée Chalamet** are looking to get back in the saddle for an original heist joint. The movie, recently picked up by Paramount, follows a trauma-stricken former MotoGP racer whose estranged brother ropes him into robbing banks.

Main: Jaded Jackson (Gary Oldman) rides again. **Above, left to right:** River (Jack Lowden) with J.K. Coe (Tom Brooke); London Mayor Zafar Jaffrey (Nick Mohammed). **Left, top to bottom:** Shirley (Aimee-Ffion Edwards) and Catherine (Saskia Reeves); Emma (Ruth Bradley) and Roddy (Christopher Chung); Diana (Kristin Scott Thomas) and Claude (James Callis).

residents of Slough House, a grubby little purgatory where disgraced MI5 agents are sent to twiddle their thumbs and stay out of further trouble. However, the rule-bending group — nicknamed the Slow Horses — keep solving crimes that elude their by-the-book former colleagues. They're begrudgingly headed by the caustic Jackson Lamb (Oldman), a leader as renowned for his tactical brilliance as for his foul personal hygiene. Lamb's use of a judiciously deployed fart to gain the upper hand in confrontational situations has made him a fan favourite and meme icon.

Season 5 begins with a London terror attack, shaking a deeply divided country. While mayor Zafar Jaffrey (Nick Mohammed) tries to keep order, a publicity-savvy right-wing challenger, Dennis Gimball (Christopher Villiers), sees fuel for his message that London is burning. As the Slow Horses try to prevent any further disaster, with typically mixed success, they're distracted by something odd happening with one of their own.

In a crowded field of crime dramas, one of the things that makes this show stand out is a cast of such depth and oddball charm that even apparently minor characters can step up to become leads. "We have Mick [Herron] to thank for that," says Smith. "[In each story] he'll bring a new character to the fore." In Season 5, that's Roddy Ho (Christopher Chung). An egomaniac incel computer whizz, he was an occasional love-to-hate-him presence in the first few seasons, uniting the rest of the team in their disdain for him, and viewers in their adoration.

"Chris was the least known [of the cast]," says Smith. "And then you put him in a room with Gary Oldman. It was a huge ask and he landed it... Ho could be a caricature. He could be too mean and nasty, but Chris makes him believable." Chung was BAFTA-nominated for the fourth season. This season, Ho's personal life puts him at the heart of the plot. Someone is trying to kill him, which is strange. Even stranger, he appears to have found a girlfriend. "We were all just rubbing our hands," says Smith. "'Ho gets a girlfriend?!' Straight away, that's hilarious, but it's also a great mystery, because you *know* that's not real."

Smith is stepping down with Season 5, but the show will go on after him. Season 6 is already shot and a seventh has been greenlit. They're headed by Gaby Chiappe and Ben Vanstone, respectively. Smith wouldn't be so gauche as to give his successors advice, but asked what he's learned about the show over his years in charge, he offers, "It's sometimes about knowing when to hold back. For example, people think [Lamb] farts more than he does... In season 5, it's only one... A weaponised fart. A story-based fart." Aspiring screenwriters take note. Only fart when the plot demands it.

SLOW HORSES **SEASON 5 IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM SEPTEMBER 24**

DANCE PARENTS

Charlize Theron and Channing Tatum are getting their dancing shoes on for the latest from *Long Shot* director Jonathan Levine. Pitched as a comedy, the Meghan Malloy-penned movie is rumoured to be set in the world of young competitive dancers and their helicopter parents.

UNTITLED CHRIS ROCK PROJECT

Chris Rock's latest directing venture — which may or may not end up being called 'Misty Green' — has lined up a stellar cast. *Slow Horses*' Rosalind Eleazar, Adam Driver, Daniel Kaluuya and Anna Kendrick have all boarded Rock's movie about an embattled actor (Eleazar) looking for a comeback.

SUBVERSION

Lily James is joining Chris Hemsworth for Patrick Vollrath's underwater actioner. Described as "*Die Hard* on a submarine", the movie — soon to shoot in Australia — follows a cartel-blackmailed navy man (Hemsworth) caught in a cat-and-mouse game with a coastguard (James) while smuggling cargo overseas.

STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER

Matt Smith has signed on to menace Ryan Gosling alongside Mia Goth in Shawn Levy's new *Star Wars* movie. Smith will play a villain in the new chapter, a standalone adventure set five years after *The Rise Of Skywalker*, currently slated for release on 28 May 2027.

THE HEIDI FLEISS STORY

'Hollywood Madam' Heidi Fleiss' story will be told in a new biopic starring **Aubrey Plaza**. Co-written by *Shiva Baby*'s Rachel Sennott, the movie — about to start production in LA — covers the moments before Fleiss' conviction for her part in the world's then-largest high-end prostitution ring.

Getty Images

Top to bottom: Sam Riley and Alexandra Maria Lara; The morning commute had gone horribly wrong; Director Ben Wheatley at painstaking work; Perplexed? Wait 'til you see the film.

Ben Wheatley's most brain-melting film yet?

THE FILMMAKER RETURNS TO HIS ROOTS WITH LOW-BUDGET, BLACK-AND-WHITE SCI-FI **BULK**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE LAST TIME Ben Wheatley made a movie, it involved Jason Statham titting about on a jet ski and a giant shark. But in case you were worried that directing *The Meg 2* meant that Wheatley was saying "goodbye, chum" to the kind of low-budget, high-concept film that had made his reputation, here's the good news: his new film, *Bulk*, is going to bake your brain.

A film so demented that it makes *A Field In England* look like, well, a field in England, *Bulk* almost defies description, but we'll give it a go. After an experiment goes horribly wrong, Sam Riley's journalist is recruited to find a missing scientist (Noah Taylor), who is somewhere in a world of his creation. That, thankfully for the budget, just happens to look like a suburban house. Cue much hijinks as Riley, real-life spouse Alexandra Maria Lara as a mysterious companion, and Taylor as, well, lots of different folk, go from room to room, world to world, on an extremely odd odyssey where nothing is what it seems. Shot on various formats, largely in black-and-white, with back projection galore, and liberal use of Airfix kits, *Bulk* is Wheatley's most experimental film to date. "I was building models in my kitchen," Wheatley tells *Empire*, "and started thinking about *Eraserhead*, and how that's basically a film shot in one room."

Suitably inspired to do "something that was sci-fi, and fun", and which would play well for midnight crowds at film festivals, Wheatley wrote the (extremely meta) screenplay in about a month. Shooting took place in and around Brighton, with the whole thing taking 14 days. *The Meg 2* took nearly four months.

Not that Wheatley sees this as a reaction to that or other recent bigger-budget ventures like *Rebecca*. "I had a great time doing *The Meg 2*," he says. "There's a lot of DNA between that and *Bulk*. A lot of thinking about Jules Verne, *Thunderbirds*, and Harryhausen and model work. It was just more writ large." Wheatley sees his career as a journey, with projects feeding into and informing each other. His next directorial outing, the action movie *Normal*, is ostensibly about "Bob Odenkirk coming into a small town, finding a terrible secret, and then kicking serious ass for almost half the film", but it deploys model-building techniques Wheatley used on *Bulk*. "It's all invisible, old-school model work," he says.

This is where Wheatley would like to live, creatively, splitting time between more commercial ventures and quirkier, quicker projects like *Bulk*. "I'd do it again at the drop of a hat," he says. "I'm thinking about what my *Star Wars* would look like." Not so fast, Kathleen Kennedy — Wheatley's talking about making something that *feels* like *Star Wars*, but with *Bulk*'s production techniques and budget. "Basically, all the gear to do the 1977 *Star Wars* is available on Amazon, for not much money," he adds. "And it can be as enjoyable as something that costs a hundred million." Welcome back, chum.

***BULK* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

THE MVP

MEET OUR HERO OF THE MONTH

TAYLOR GORDON

***THE LIFE OF CHUCK'S* DRUMMING LEGEND**

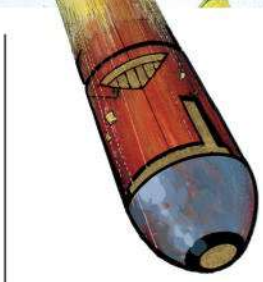
You're a world-famous drummer who had never acted before this. What drew you to the film?
It was interesting that it was based on a Stephen King novella. Typically his work's on the scary side, as is Mike Flanagan's, and I'm very squeamish, but this pivots to joy, which is a very big anchor in my life.

You wrote your own composition for the dance sequence with Tom Hiddleston. What were your influences?
I was thinking of *West Side Story*, the whole (*sings introduction to 'Cool'*), and the Blue Man Group. They make very catchy and memorable drum sequences, and I needed a 'thing' that would connect with people.

You've shared the stage with Beyoncé and Dua Lipa. How does Tom's dance moves compare to theirs?
The most beautiful thing to me about Tom's scene is that he's relatable. I think all of us saw ourselves in the way he moves. It's so raw and unrefined, and that is sometimes the most powerful thing that you can be.

Has this awoken an appetite to do more movies?
Cinema is very responsible for my repertoire, and why it's so vast. So it did confirm something for me, especially talking to Tom and seeing the commonalities that exist between musicians and actors. Working with J.J. Abrams would be great — he's reached out before.

***THE LIFE OF CHUCK* IS IN CINEMAS NOW**



(RE)DAWN OF THE DREDD

CHARTING THE HYPER-VIOLENT PATH TO TAIKA WAITITI'S APOCALYPTIC COMIC-BOOK ADAPTATION

Above: *2000AD* issue 1203 cover featuring Judge Dredd. **Below:** Director Taika Waititi.

THE COMICS 1977

Created by writer John Wagner and artist Carlos Ezquerra, Judge Joseph Dredd debuted in the second issue of British anthology comic *2000 AD*, acting as judge, jury and executioner in the post-nuclear metropolis of Mega-City One. Heavily armoured and weaponed, Dredd offered a walking, tersely talking critique of authoritarianism, and fans embraced the brutality: Eagle Comics' standalone *Judge Dredd* series launched in the US in 1983, and the *Judge Dredd Megazine* afforded the square-jawed antihero his own British title in 1990.

THE SCOTT DREAM EARLY '90s

Tony Scott attached himself to a Dredd adaptation, with Arnold Schwarzenegger poised to don the helmet. Tantalisingly, a script by Peter Briggs (*Hellboy*) pitted Dredd against his arch comic-book nemesis Judge Death, who has killed all life in his own world after surmising that crime is committed by the living, and now looks for new dimensions to judge.

Sadly, a force stronger than either Dredd or Death — creative differences — killed the project.

THE FIRST ADAPTATION 1995

The iconic lawman finally made it to screen, played by Sylvester Stallone in a shiny codpiece.

The adaptation was praised for its blend of practical effects and CGI in rendering a sprawling, soaring Mega-City One, but lambasted for the po-faced tone of Danny Cannon's $90 million spectacle, and its attempt to humanise its murally-murky protagonist by removing his helmet. With a worldwide box office of $113.5 million, it was deemed a flop.

THE SECOND ADAPTATION 2012

Directed by Pete Travis, scripted by Alex Garland and titled, simply, *Dredd*, this stripped-down take set the majority of its action in Peach Trees, a single, 200-storey Mega Block ruled by Lena Headey's queenpin, Ma-Ma. The film has endured thanks to its short, sharp action scenes and Karl Urban channelling Clint Eastwood as he attacked the block with the aid of Olivia Thirlby's rookie, Anderson. But a return of $41 million on a $45 million budget shot down any chance of a sequel.

THE THIRD ADAPTATION TBC

TV series *Judge Dredd: Mega-City One* was announced in 2017 but continues to face development challenges. Meanwhile, as of July this year, Taika Waititi has been announced as director of a new movie adaptation with *The Fall Guy*'s Drew Pearce on screenwriting duty. The Kiwi filmmaker is no stranger to juggling mythologies, comedy and social commentary, which bodes well as the pitch for the film is said to lean closely into the world-building and dark humour of the comics. With a *Dredd* universe across movies and shows mooted, might we finally see Judge Death? Some laws are ready to be rewritten. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

Andy Starke, © Courtesy of Rebellion/2000 AD, Getty Images

Once upon a time... with a twist

DIRECTOR JULIA JACKMAN AND STAR MAIKA MONROE ON THEIR FEMINIST FAIRY TALE, 100 NIGHTS OF HERO

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

FORGET *SLEEPING BEAUTY*. Move over, *Rapunzel*. Take a hike, *Snow White*. With the graphic-novel adaptation *100 Nights Of Hero*, a new kind of fairy tale is headed to the big screen.

Written and directed by Julia Jackman (whose feature debut *Bonus Track* was released in 2023), *100 Nights Of Hero* pays homage to *One Thousand And One Nights*, the centuries-old collection of Middle Eastern folktales in which female narrator Scheherazade tells stories to her husband each night to avoid execution. Here, within a fantastical universe that sees women forbidden from reading or writing, the storyteller is a quick-witted maid called Hero (Emma Corrin), servant to Cherry (Maika Monroe), with whom she's a *little* bit in love. When Cherry's spouse abandons her, leaving her with a handsome houseguest (Manfred, played by Nicholas Galitzine) intent on seducing her, Hero steps in, distracting him from his mission by telling mystical tales.

There's a castle, a (sort of) damsel in distress, and a (kind of) charming prince — but this is not the standard fable you might expect. As Monroe tells *Empire*, "We grew up with classic princesses, and this turns that upside down." The off-kilter, three-mooned world of *100 Nights Of Hero* is a knowing, self-aware one,

Top to bottom: Maika Monroe as Cherry; Emma Corrin plays the titular Hero, Cherry's maid; Writer-director Julia Jackman on set.

Jed Knight, Alexandru Roberto Rusu, Matt Towers

Left, top to bottom: Manfred (Nicholas Galitzine) has his eyes on Cherry; Felicity Jones, front, as Moon; Manfred possibly querying Cherry's choice of headgear...

packed with jabs at the kind of misogyny and female repression this kind of story is normally laced with, centred around a sapphic romance, and with a thread of feminist rebellion running through it. "It's rare to find something that has this hopeful anger to it," Jackman tells *Empire*. "It has this mix of darkness and humour. That was what I really responded to."

This is a passion project for Jackman, who first read the graphic novel back in 2017, before she was a professional filmmaker. "I was working as an English teacher in Italy," she says, "and said to my friend, 'Someone has to make this into a film one day.'" Cut to November 2024, and *Empire* is on set at the grand stately home Knebworth House, standing right behind Jackman in one of its ornate gardens, observing her and her crew trying to capture a shot of Corrin running past a guard before the golden-hour light disappears. "Hold for aeroplane, please," a sound technician shouts, and everyone falls silent as the pink hues in the sky intensify, springing into action once the plane passes. We watch scenes being filmed in opulent bedrooms from cramped hallways and a high-ceilinged library, walking up and down an angular wooden staircase surrounded by suits of armour and enormous oil paintings between set-ups. It's an evocative location packed with history, serving Jackman's artistic vision for the film as well as production requirements. "I wanted that more textured, alive, *The Princess Bride* feeling — a soft, analogue feel, rather than super-slick CGI," she explains. "It was sometimes five places in one. There was always a little corner where you could find something beautiful and make it work."

Bottoms star Galitzine was the first actor on board, thanks to his "infectious enthusiasm for the story", Jackman says. With Cherry, it was Monroe's horror background (which includes *Longlegs*, *It Follows* and more) that appealed. "Women are killed all the time in this world for cheating or turning men down," Jackman says. "In a way, you'd experience [Cherry's story] like a horror." When *Empire* puts this theory to Monroe, she laughs in agreement — but for the actor, this project was also a chance to take on something a little lighter. "It was just so nice to not be covered in blood most days," she says.

When finding her Hero, it was more of an innate quality connected to the character's storytelling nature that drew Jackman to Corrin (who is non-binary, and uses they/them pronouns). "Emma just had this amazing way of speaking that made you want to lean in closer," the director recalls. "They have this soothing voice, and then suddenly this very dry, quick sense of humour. An androgynous, non-binary Hero felt right to me. It's not about that label — they just intrinsically embody that timeless charm."

The biggest challenge for Jackman (other than the overhead plane noise, of course) was capturing the unique tone of Greenberg's graphic novel. "It's very grounded, but with this absurdity," she explains. "It's tricky when so many awful, destructive things can feel so stupid and ridiculous." The end goal is a story that uses traditional fairy-tale tropes as a vehicle for more radical ideas about empowerment, desire and preserving oppressed communities. "When things are forbidden, there are always brave people who work to help it survive," Jackman says. "It's this feeling of stories just refusing to die, because ordinary people refuse to comply." An incredibly real sentiment, delivered through a film based in fantasy.

***100 NIGHTS OF HERO* DOES NOT CURRENTLY HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Sea changes on Pandora

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH MARINERS BRENDAN COWELL AND JEMAINE CLEMENT ON THEIR BRINY RETURN

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

WITH *AVATAR: The Way Of Water*, James Cameron presented to audiences a world full of whale-bonding and subaqueous spectacle. He also introduced two compelling human characters to his sci-fi saga: Brendan Cowell's hissable, harpoon-happy seadog Mick Scoresby, and Jemaine Clement's more empathic marine biologist Dr Ian Garvin, both of whom work for the nefarious Resources Development Administration (RDA). Speaking with *Empire*, the pair discuss the dysfunctional duo's return in the third *Avatar* instalment: *Fire And Ash*.

The last time we saw you both on screen, Scoresby had just lost his tulkun-hunting vessel and Dr Garvin had narrowly escaped with his life. How has the final showdown in *Way Of Water* impacted these guys' workplace dynamic?
Jemaine Clement: You know, in a different situation I think Scoresby and Garvin could have been friends. Their personalities don't clash *that* much, but they're very morally opposed with what [the other person's] doing.

So *Fire And Ash* isn't a buddy comedy, then?
Brendan Cowell: Well, it's actually more like a romantic comedy, when you think about it. (*Laughs*) The work draws them together, they've got all these opposing views, and they just can't stop thinking about each other.
Clement: (*Laughs*) Brendan and Jemaine are good buds. Scoresby and Garvin... are not good buds. It's not a spoiler to say Jim set up in the previous movie that we're heading for a collision, that we're heading for these guys' conflict to play out, and yeah... it does in *Fire And Ash*.

Where are Garvin and Scoresby's heads at when we rejoin them here?
Clement: Garvin went to Pandora to pursue knowledge, and now he's here destroying the things that he loves when he'd rather be out there

Main: A life on the ocean wave: Brendan Cowell seeks vengeance as Captain Mick Scoresby. **Below:** Dive of the Conchord: Jemaine Clement plays Ian Garvin.

Disney, Getty Images

scuba-diving or petting space mammals or something. So, yeah, he's angry about the whole situation. And then in this one, he really gets pushed past what he can take by the corporate powers and he lashes out in a pretty big way.

Cowell: What Jim and I talked about for Scoresby in this film is how he arrived as this wind-in-the-hair cowboy-of-the-seas in the last one, out to make some bank, have some laughs. He's not in it for the wind, the hair, the laughs, or the money this time. He lost his last fight, he knows there's this generational, ancestral hatred towards him, and so this time it's personal. It's destructive. And in terms of what he wants to do, it's probably a little more violent, too.

Scorseby lost an arm in *Way Of Water* — that was pretty gnarly.

Clement: It's fine — in the future they can handle it. (*Laughs*)

Cowell: Exactly. We've all been there, right? An arm down, a few pissed-off tulkun up! (*Laughs*) But don't underestimate that Scoresby may use his loss and turn it into a superpower.

A few months away from release, what's exciting you most about the latest chapter?

Cowell: When you watch *Fire And Ash*, you can tell Jim's doing what he wants to do as a filmmaker: he's saying what he wants to say. He manages to make these very mainstream movies that reach so many audiences, but there's always a real message in there. And this one's got a real toughness to it. A lot of conflict was set up in the last movie that comes home in a wonderful and disastrous way.

Clement: Yeah. And you know, one of my favourite film-going experiences was seeing *Terminator 2* when it came out. I just remember being so pumped and so excited — there was nothing like it. And then you're on the set of this, seeing the technology, the exosuits and the ships and everything, and you're like, "Oh, it's like I'm in a James Cameron movie. Oh, I *am* in the James Cameron movie!" It's huge.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM DECEMBER 19**

Here: Are Glen Powell and Leo Woodall set to Marvel up? **Below:** Kevin Feige.

DON'T CALL IT A REBOOT

KEVIN FEIGE HAS CONFIRMED THAT MARVEL WILL RECAST SOME MAJOR HEROES. WHAT COMES NEXT?

AFTER MUCH SPECULATION, Kevin Feige is now on the record stating that Marvel is looking to recast characters like Tony Stark and Steve Rogers in the great reset that will follow 2027's *Avengers: Secret War*. That's when (we think, and Feige suggests) Marvel's existing, somewhat confusing multiverse will collapse into a new timeline. "Reboot is a scary word," he said of the decision. "Reboot can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. Reset, singular timeline — we're thinking along those lines."

That means that characters we know and love may never have existed in this reality, clearing the path for new incarnations of those heroes to appear without entirely negating or rewriting the originals. It means that, in this reality, Tony Stark may not yet have made his first suit, and Steve Rogers may not have been discovered under the ice — or they could be existing multiverse variants that end up on this new, combined Earth. Feige compared the renewal to Superman or Bond, but let's not get into arguments about whether all those Bonds are the same guy.

So who should be on the phone to their agent right now? Well, first of all, the potential Tonys and Steves might want to hold fire: a recast post-reset could still be five or more years away, the better to avoid audience confusion. By the time we get there, the charismatic and quippy Glen Powell would be old enough for Tony, or Jacob Elordi, if you want to go younger and a little more serious. Right now, Leo Woodall or Lukas Gage have the looks and potentially the steadiness for Steve, but they'll have to fend off every blond, muscly guy who emerges in the near future to land the role.

So it's a bold new world, but it doesn't preclude old favourites, and that's an exciting prospect. They just have to pull off two more pieces of casting on a par with Robert Downey Jr and Chris Evans. No pressure, Marvel. What are two more miracles?

HELEN O'HARA

On A Role

CILLIAN MURPHY IS STEVE

THE ACTOR PLAYS A TROUBLED HEADTEACHER IN *STEVE*

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

THE MINDSET

Playing the title character in Tim Mielants' drama *Steve* exhausted Cillian Murphy. Screenwriter Max Porter spun the story from his 1990s-set 2023 novella *Shy*, changing the perspective from the titular kid to a headteacher navigating a volatile 24 hours at an under-funded school for troubled teenage boys. "I wanted to be in a heightened, almost lucid, hyper-focused state of exhaustion," says Murphy of the process. "I wasn't in a great place during it. And we shot it all chronologically, in six weeks, in one location, so it felt like you were living the thing." Mielants' penchant for setting stuff up to surprise the cast on camera, on the fly, further intensified Murphy's on-set mindset — and as if *that* weren't enough, the actor was also producing the film. "So I would jump off set and have meetings about budget and casting. I was in a heightened state of anxiety. I was fucked up," he laughs — out of relief that he got through it, perhaps.

Top to bottom: A class act: teacher Steve (Cillian Murphy); Troubled teenagers give Steve trouble; Murphy and Simbiatu Ajikawo on set; Steve's style icon: Bryan Ferry.

THE LOOK

Steve cuts an unassuming, if somewhat harried, haggard figure. It's a look that doesn't bring attention to itself — but getting there wasn't as easy as that might seem. "Man, that took a long time," says Murphy. Working alongside costume designer Alison McCosh, it was a process of elimination, he explains. "You shouldn't wear glasses: every fucking teacher [on screen] wears glasses. That's just signalling, 'I'm a thinker, so I wear glasses.' And he shouldn't wear an earring to represent his ambitious past as a failed writer, or whatever it is. Just put a shitty beard on him, give him a shitty haircut, make him look fucking exhausted, and give him a rumpled linen suit. Because maybe in 1985, he thought Bryan Ferry was cool or something." Steve, alas, is not nearly as smooth.

THE ADDICTION

On top of everything else — or possibly, in part, due to everything else — Steve is also addicted to opioids. To portray this authentically, Murphy spoke to a recovering addict. "I wanted to get that right," he explains. "Because the last thing you want to do is glamorise it, or make it cool. So I had good conversations about that. I learned that it's very possible to continue functioning while being addicted to opioids, so that was very informative."

THE SELF-EXAMINATION

Porter wrote the role in the film for Murphy, and, knowing him well, put a lot of him into it. "It was one of the most terrifying things I've ever done," says the actor. "Because there was no accent, no research, really. It was just *me*. It was very naked and very revealing and very vulnerable." When he's playing the likes of Robert Oppenheimer or *Peaky Blinders*' Tommy Shelby, explains Murphy, there's a sort of armour, with the suit, the headwear, the voice. But not here. "With this guy, it was like, 'Oh fuck, I just have to be available and porous and completely open.' And that's fucking scary." There's a lesson in that.

***STEVE* WILL BE IN SELECT CINEMAS FROM SEPTEMBER 19 AND ON NETFLIX FROM OCTOBER 3**

Alamy, Getty Images

THE TRUMP TROLLING TAKING OVER TV

SOUTH PARK'S 27TH SEASON IS MAKING MORE HEADLINES THAN EVER WITH ITS MERCILESS POTUS MOCKERY

THE ELECTION OF Trump as President was — Trey Parker said — like a monkey running into a wall: "You're like: 'That's funny,' but how am I going to *make fun* of the monkey?" he pondered. "I can discuss the monkey... I can copy the monkey... But nothing's funnier than the monkey just running into the wall." The point was a fair one: satire is about using comedy to expose the stupidity and brutality beneath the surface. With Trump, many would argue that the stupidity and brutality are already *on* the surface — how do you satirise that?

Eight years later, Parker and his creative partner Matt Stone have very much found a way. For *South Park*'s 27th season, the pair have come out all guns blazing against the second Trump administration — portraying ICE as a gaggle of mask-clad simpletons, JD Vance as a baby-oil-wielding imp, and the Donald himself as a micro-penised megalomaniac in bed with Satan. And it's just getting started. The show is no stranger to angering powerful people — since its 1997 debut it's aimed headline-making potshots at Scientology, Catholicism and Presidents from Clinton to Obama — but this latest broadside feels different, largely because of Parker's previous comments about wanting to avoid Trump-centric gags. So, what's changed?

Top Trumps: just some of the ways *South Park* has lambasted the American President.

Well, it's partly personal. Season 27's first episode — aired back in July — skewered *South Park*'s own paymasters, Paramount, for their decision to offer Trump a $16 million settlement rather than fight his lawsuit against their alleged "fake" news reporting. There's also the fact that this current crop of Republicans seem particularly easily riled, with White House representatives dubbing *South Park* "lazy", "not relevant" and "fourth-rate" — comments that will surely act as red rags for Parker and Stone as the season progresses. Indeed, when ICE used a screengrab from the show on its X account recently, *South Park*'s retorted on its with: "Wait, so we ARE relevant? #eatabagofdicks".

It's a rare thing that a show is still so subversive and outrageous nearly 30 years after its birth. Whatever your political leaning, watching the rest of this hyper-volatile season play out should be *far* more entertaining than a monkey running into a wall. **TOM ELLEN**

***SOUTH PARK* IS ON PARAMOUNT+ NOW**

AS IF '90S NOSTALGIA IS BACK!

DUST OFF YOUR YELLOW PLAID... A WAVE OF CLASSIC MOVIES ARE GETTING A MODERN REVAMP

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING

Love triangles have become something of a beat for Celine Song, who will pen the sequel to this '97 romcom. It's unconfirmed if Julia Robert's food critic Julianne, her titular BFF/crush (Dermot Mulroney) and his wife (Cameron Diaz) will return, but based on the original, expect heartbreak, sabotage and hopefully another iconically dire karaoke performance.

CLUELESS

Calvin Klein dresses at the ready: a TV reboot of the classic '95 teen comedy is incoming. Alicia Silverstone will return as forthright fashionista Cher, and although details are under wraps, hopefully she'll return with her A-game (retail CEO? Politician? Life coach?) and plenty of cameos incoming (cc Paul Rudd). The series is currently in its "baby stages" according to Silverstone.

10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU

A *10 Things* trilogy is being developed, with the '99 movie's filmmaker Gil Junger set to co-write *10 Things I Hate About Dating*, *...Marriage* and *...Kids*. The first sequel is inspired by Molière's *The Misanthrope* according to Junger, who is keen to reunite with Julia Stiles for the film. Time to unearth your copy of *The Bell Jar*. **BETH WEBB**

The heist that hooked a noir master

HOW A CAREER CRIMINAL PULLED SHANE BLACK BACK TO FILMMAKING WITH **PLAY DIRTY**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

SHANE BLACK WAS 12 when he first met Parker. "I was at the dentist," he tells *Empire*. "And I went downstairs, where there was a little spinner rack in a bookstore." On it were a number of novels by Donald E. Westlake (under the pen name Richard Stark) about a professional thief called, simply, Parker. The writing was lean, mean, and laced with dark humour. If you've seen anything Black has written or directed, whether it's *The Long Kiss Goodnight* or *The Nice Guys*, the Westlake influence has been writ large. "I used to say that if noir was a fine whiskey, Westlake's the stuff you'd keep behind the bar," he adds. "It's the good stuff." And now Black wants the world to meet Parker with his new movie, *Play Dirty*.

Well, meet might be pushing it. Westlake wrote 28 Parker books before he died in 2008, several of which have already been adapted for the big screen. Only most have not included Parker; Westlake would not allow productions to use the name if they couldn't commit to making a series of movies. So, in John Boorman's *Point Blank*, Parker is Walker. In 1973's *The Outfit*, he's Macklin. In 1999's *Payback*, Porter.

Play Dirty — an original Parker story that draws upon but does not directly adapt the Westlake books — is different. It stars Mark Wahlberg as actual Parker, who finds himself in the middle of a hugely dangerous billion-dollar heist. Initially, Robert Downey Jr had been on board, but he stepped away. "He stayed on as producer, along with his wife, Susan Downey," says Black. "He went off to do something else and Mark Wahlberg stepped in."

Wahlberg did so four days after Downey Jr departed. "He wanted to play it straight and tough," says Black. "It's important that this be an edgy version of Parker." Parker is not a Shane Black-style quip-dispenser. For that, Black surrounds him with a vital supporting cast, including LaKeith Stanfield as Alan Grofield and Keegan-Michael Key as Ed Mackey, two Westlake stalwart characters, and Rosa Salazar as the mysterious Zen, with whom Parker forms the uneasiest of alliances. "I'm not a big believer in the femme fatale character," teases Black of Salazar's character. "We reject those tropes. In Parker's world, love, or even affection, is a liability which can get you killed. So the distrust between the two helps the movie a great deal."

Play Dirty is Black's first film as director since 2018's *The Predator* was a commercial and critical

Above: Mark Wahlberg, director Shane Black and Thomas Jane. **Left:** Parker (Wahlberg) with Grofield (LaKeith Stanfield). **Below left:** Planning a heist is a serious business.

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

disappointment. "I think we shot the wrong script," he says. "We tried to make a sort of Halloween B-movie. That was not a movie that was a masterpiece by any means." But its reception doesn't explain that seven-year gap on his CV. "I looked for projects, and didn't find anything too terribly intriguing," he says. Then Joel Silver, who gave Black his big break as both a writer (*Lethal Weapon*) and director (*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*), came calling.

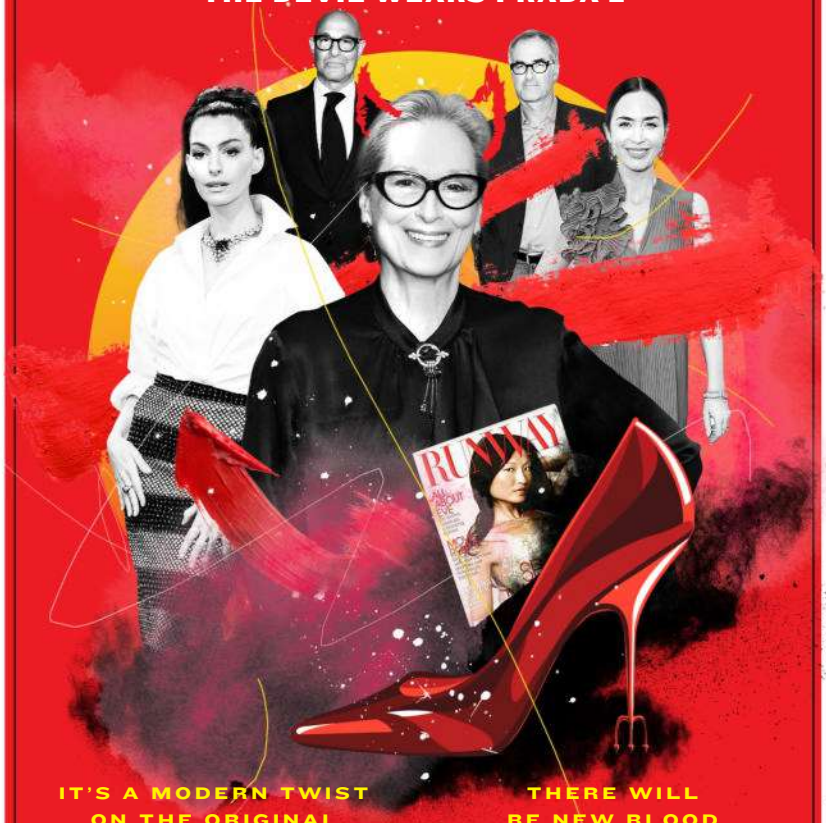
"He said, 'What books do you like?'" recalls Black. He had just the series in mind. "Joel managed to corral those rights — it was very difficult — and we pitched Amazon." Prime Video gave Silver and Black the green light, and they were off. Silver has moved on from the project, but Black has stayed the course. And there may be more course to run. No actor has played Parker, or a Parker equivalent, twice. Yet. "There's a franchise there to be had, if someone wants it," says Black. "I have other projects I'd like to do on my own, just to write and see if anyone likes them. But I am not averse to a Parker sequel." Makes sense. After all, there were a lot of Parker stories on that spinner rack...

***PLAY DIRTY* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM OCTOBER 1**

Above: Partners in crime: Parker and Zen (Rosa Salazar).

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA 2



IT'S A MODERN TWIST ON THE ORIGINAL

As recently as 2022, the film's star, Anne Hathaway, was squashing any hopes of a follow-up to the fashion-mag-fuelled drama-comedy. "There's not going to be a sequel," she said during an interview. "It's just not going to happen, we just can't do it. It's just not going to happen." By 2024, however, her stance had softened, suggesting that the right idea for the world today could work. "Now with so much being digital, it would just be very different," she said of *Prada*'s print-based premise. It seems that returning screenwriter Aline Brosh McKenna (who also penned the original book) has cracked the case, as on June 30 it was officially announced that the film, starring Hathaway as personal-assistant-turned-hotshot-journalist Andy, was happening.

MORE HEADLINERS ARE RETURNING

Meryl Streep will reprise her Oscar-nominated role as Miranda Priestly, the feared, Anna Wintour-esque editor-in-chief of fictional fashion mag *Runway*. Emily Blunt, who made her Hollywood breakthrough as Miranda's highly strung senior assistant Emily, is also back, along with Stanley Tucci's former art director Nigel. Adrian Grenier's Nate — Andy's sous-chef ex-flame — will not be returning, which makes sense as he was last seen chasing his culinary dreams to Boston.

THERE WILL BE NEW BLOOD

Kenneth Branagh will play Mr Priestly 2.0 after Miranda's previous marriage fizzled out in the first film. Many fresh faces will be joining him, including Lucy Liu, Justin Theroux and *Bridgerton*'s Simone Ashley. Their roles are currently under wraps, although it can be assumed that at least some of them will work in the world of new media given the direction of the sequel.

IT WILL TURN TABLES

Speaking of which! This story will reportedly see something of a power switch. Amid the rapidly changing landscape of print publishing, Miranda must navigate a new career. To keep afloat she must pursue advertising money, the purse-strings for which are held by none other than Emily, now a powerful luxury-group executive. Could Emily still feel raw after years of working under Miranda's punishing regime?

CAMERAS ARE CURRENTLY ROLLING

Andy and co were plunged back into the world of haute couture and hellfire in June, with filming taking place in Italy and New York. As early footage has shown Hathaway striding through the city with a *Runway* bag, it seems that she's yet to shake the clutches of Priestly completely.

***THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA 2* IS IN CINEMAS FROM MAY 1, 2026**

Marlon & Me

BILLY ZANE ON HIS LIFELONG JOURNEY TOWARDS TACKLING A TITAN IN WALTZING WITH BRANDO

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

THERE ARE SOME bongos behind Billy Zane. This seems appropriate on a couple of levels: firstly, they just seem *very Billy Zane*, who has always travelled through the world with an impish playfulness, but also because such percussion prominently features in *Waltzing With Brando*, in which he plays the late icon during the 1970s as he lives his best life in Tahiti. "I bought them for the movie," Zane explains, Zooming in from his home. "They're from the '50s. I found them at a great pawn shop here in LA and they were perfect." Alas, it was ultimately decided to not use them in the film, and here they live. He plays them a bit. "But takeaway chopsticks on a dashboard is really my best instrument."

Director Bill Fishman's film follows Brando as he and architect Bernard Judge (Jon Heder) plan the construction of an environmentally friendly paradise home. Zane has been a fan ever since watching *On The Waterfront* at grade school in Chicago. "And then I went down the rabbit hole. He was a spectre, a North Star, for me, starting out." That continued as Zane took in Brando's catalogue, including *Apocalypse Now*, and all the eccentricity that came with it: "My favourite cocktail is chaos plus talent," he says of the older Brando's approach to work.

Fate brought Zane to *Waltzing With Brando*. He's now 59, but back in his early thirties, he saw some old footage of Brando with his wife Tarita, doing a Tahitian dance together. "It was just beautiful. He was in his happy place." He had a notion that one day he would play Brando, and specifically in this period. Then, some years ago, he was swimming in an Olympic pool in Los Angeles. "You have to take the waters, you see," he explains of such visits. There, by the pool, someone handed him a phone, and Fishman, a friend of Zane's, was on the line, telling him he was making a film about Brando's Tahiti era. "And then thus it was," muses Zane.

He decided to play Brando "counter-intuitively. Which was to do it as if he would have done it, which was to not give a shit. I had to just be in his headspace." This is something of an over-statement; for the scenes in which he recreates Brando's performances in the likes of *The Godfather*, *Superman* and *Apocalypse Now*, he apes him painstakingly. "It was such a beautiful and collaborative effort that painted those moments and the meticulous task of those recreations," he says, going about them "frame by frame, breath by breath".

That in turn allowed him to inhabit Brando more loosely for the rest of the film, and he hopes the delight he found doing so will translate. "It was important to create a cool drink of water," he says of the end product. "An oasis of a series of pleasantries peppered by surprising information, where you leave with a genuine joy." A bit like speaking to Billy Zane.

Portrait of a screen legend: Billy Zane plays Brando during the 1970s in (main) *Last Tango In Paris* and (top to bottom) *The Godfather*, *Superman* and *Apocalypse Now*.

WALTZING WITH BRANDO **DOES NOT CURRENTLY HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Alamy, Sphere Entertainment

LIONS AND TIGERS AND AI, OH MY!

HOW THE WIZARD OF OZ'S LAS VEGAS MAKEOVER HAS CAUSED A TORNADO OF CRITICISM

IMAGINE THE YELLOW brick road spanning the length of four football fields. Or Dorothy's Kansas farmhouse spiralling up and over your head on a 160,000 square-foot LED screen while the sound of wind whips through 167,000 speakers. This is what's being promised at the Sphere, where Las Vegas audiences can watch *The Wizard Of Oz* on its behemoth AV set-up.

Yet while this may sound like an immersive experience akin to entering the Emerald City, the project has sparked mass criticism. Because in order to translate Victor Fleming's Technicolor masterpiece into the space, artificial intelligence has been liberally deployed to "amplify" the original film. Google Cloud built a custom model for the film that has not only changed its texture to appear ultra-smooth, but used a method called outpainting to flood the surrounding screen. A scene involving Dorothy and the Scarecrow in conversation, for example, is now surrounded by an AI-powered extension of the yellow brick road, with the mountains of Oz in the distance. It even generates performances, inserting Charley Grapewin's Uncle Henry into a scene that he was previously absent from.

It's a kind of magic: the Sphere has given classic movie *The Wizard Of Oz* a modern makeover, aided by AI, and turned it into a massive immersive event.

What's being framed as a bid to bring the film to new audiences (with tickets starting from around $100), in fact, say others, marks a dangerous milestone in the encroaching impact of AI on Hollywood. "It is the death of cinema," one X user posted under a clip of the amplified footage. "You're removing their agency — the frame of a film is art and choices are made deliberately," wrote another about *The Wizard Of Oz*'s filmmakers.

And it doesn't seem to be stopping with Oz. *The Matrix* has also received the immersive treatment, with accompanying CG landscapes surrounding the original film in LA's Cosm venue. It's a slightly less invasive approach to that of the Sphere. "The movie itself is the lead singer and we are the backing band," said Jay Rinsky, founder of Little Cinema, the company behind it. But with the experience economy now bigger than ever, expect a whole lot more movie coming to a megavenue near you soon. Oh Toto, I don't think we're in the multiplex anymore.

BETH WEBB

***THE WIZARD OF OZ* IS AT THE SPHERE FROM AUGUST 28**

SPIDEY SLINGS TO SCOTLAND

WITH *SPIDER-MAN: BRAND NEW DAY* SHOOTING IN GLASGOW, HERE'S WHAT'S BEEN REVEALED SO FAR

NEW SUIT

Tom Holland delighted fans in August by revealing Supe's new suit for the fourth film on Instagram. The spandex-looking set-up seems to signal a more traditional approach to the costume than the MCU's recent high-tech, Stark Industries-designed versions. And could there be an homage to previous red-and-blue Spider-Man iterations with that tactile, raised webbing?

PRACTICAL MAGIC

Holland has said that *Brand New Day* will "lean into old-school filmmaking and shoot in real locations". That appears to be true, as the production has taken to the streets of the Scottish city, doubling here for New York. Huge practical effects have been spotted of a stunt-double Spidey (we assume) swinging off cranes, cars flipping over at intersections and explosions galore.

OLD FACES

John Bernthal brings anti-hero The Punisher and some Defender crossover energy to the new instalment. Plus Mark Ruffalo's Bruce Banner will (hopefully) reunite with a now ostracised and unknown Peter Parker as he sets out *sans* MJ and Ned. Solo Spidey needs all the smashing power he can get.

SOPHIE BUTCHER

***SPIDER-MAN: BRAND NEW DAY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM JULY 31, 2026**

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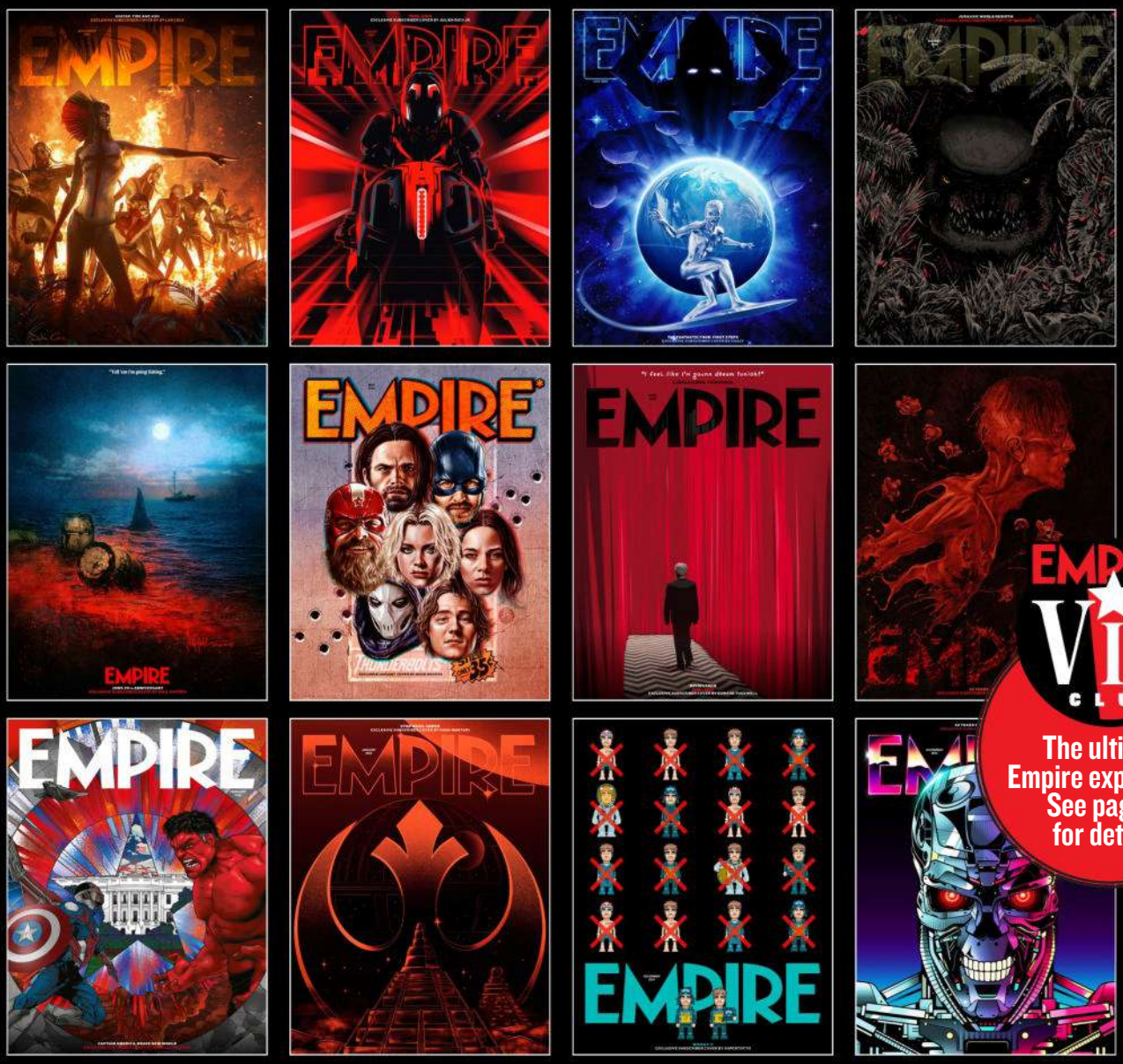

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Timothy Olyphant

THE *ALIEN: EARTH* STAR LOVES THE TASTE OF ICE CREAM. PUPPY TEETH, LESS SO

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA**

ARNO

When have you been most star-struck?
I remember being a kid at a swim meet, and Carrie Steinseifer had just won a gold medal in the '84 Olympics. She might have been younger than I was. I was like, "Oh, it's a gold medalist right over there." I realise now that it might have been just that she was cute, but I was very excited.

What is one thing that you do better than anyone else you know?
I'm gonna stay on the swim theme. I've got a stupid trick that I very rarely get to show off. I can blow [bubble] rings in a swimming pool. A lot of swimmers can, but I'm particularly proud of mine.

How much is a pint of milk?
The real question is: how much is a pint of bourbon?

What was your role in your first school play?
Never been in one. Acting was just a hunch. My first play was an off-Broadway play at Playwrights Horizons. First scene? Naked. Welcome to show business! I started late but I came early.

Do you have any tattoos?
No. Didn't Kim Kardashian say something about putting bumper stickers on a Rolls-Royce? (*Bentley, actually.*) I'm not saying I'm a Rolls-Royce. I'm just saying that she said it, and God bless her for it.

What's the worst job you've ever had?
Waiting tables is one of those jobs that encourages you to succeed at other things. I did my time after college, when I moved to New York to be an actor.

If you weren't an actor, what would you be?
I spend an embarrassing amount of time thinking about this, and it's sad that I come up pretty empty. All these actors with their side hustles. If I could make a living doing ceramics, I'd be there.

Do you have any scars?
Nothing noticeable. I feel like I've gotten through life pretty unscathed.

Starter or dessert?
I'm such a dessert guy. It's terrible. People make fun of you for it. Imagine the scars on the inside. I remember, I got the Elmore Leonard gig [*Justified*], and he had Raylan, in the books, eat ice cream. That alone made me feel so much more comfortable. You could be a tough guy and still like ice cream.

What is your most embarrassing movie blind spot?
Can I tell you something? I haven't seen the whole of *Lawrence Of Arabia*. It's a really long film. I just started it, like a week ago. Can I tell you something else? It's really good.

Is there a book that you've read the most?
I read a lot of scripts over and over. I haven't re-read a lot of books. I remember reading *The Phantom Tollbooth* [by Norton Juster] to my kids, and it being read to me. It was such a nice experience reading [it] to my kids. Not because of my kids; they're not particularly great. But the [book is] amazing.

Name the most disgusting thing you've eaten.
I once picked up a tooth. I thought it might have been mine. Like, did I chip a tooth? I stuck it in my mouth just to see if it fit. Turns out the puppy was losing teeth. That wasn't that disgusting, but it was memorable.

Do you have a signature dish?
My pancake game is very strong.

Who would play you in a movie?
I can't get that role? Things are going well, but I'm always looking for more. Give me a shot, at least.

Can you play a musical instrument?
Yes, very badly.

Which one?
Well, technically any of them badly. But I focus on the guitar. I picked up a guitar somewhere during that [actors'] strike.

That's a silver lining.
It depends if you're me or the person listening.

Who's the most famous person you could text?
Not Carrie Steinseifer, sadly. God, I hope she reads this.

***ALIEN: EARTH* IS ON DISNEY+ NOW**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

28 AUGUST - 24 SEPTEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Will it mostly come at night?

Top to bottom: Hybrid Wendy (Sydney Chandler); Cyborg Morrow (Babou Ceesay); Synthetic Kirsh (Timothy Olyphant).

TV

ALIEN: EARTH

ON EARTH, MANY PEOPLE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM

★★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 8**

SHOWRUNNER Noah Hawley
CAST Sydney Chandler, Timothy Olyphant, Babou Ceesay, Alex Lawther, Samuel Blenkin, Essie Davis

PLOT Two years before the Nostromo responds to that ill-fated distress call, another Weyland-Yutani vessel — with a lab full of extraterrestrial specimens — crash-lands on Earth.

ALIEN: EARTH LULLS you with familiarity. Opening on the clinical, white-padded walls of a Weyland-Yutani vessel, we find daisy-petal cryo tubes surrounded by glowing monitors that spit text with a furious chatter. A ramshackle crew, complete with creepy science officer and grousing mechanics, eat and smoke around the breakfast table. It's an almost uncanny facsimile of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, lifted straight from 1979. But while the USCSS Maginot (history nerds may knowingly smirk) is not the Nostromo, its mission ends just as unfortunately.

The crash (events leading up to which are saved for a later episode, one that could comfortably be described as the best *Alien* movie since 1986) brings us to an Earth thus far only teased at in *Alien* cinematic lore — one carved up and ruled not by governments, but by five mega-corporations. It's into this supra-capitalist dystopia that the Maginot takes its nosedive, a familiar biomechanical monster stowed in the hold.

The question of whether the *Alien* movie formula can sustain an eight-episode series is answered early on — it doesn't need to. Over five core films, two regrettable crossovers and 46 years of cultural saturation, the Xenomorph isn't the mystery it once was — something showrunner Noah Hawley knows all too well. Which is why the Xenomorph is just one of five specimens the Maginot has dredged up from the deepest reaches of space. From a parasitic eyeball to vampire termites, every one of these ornery ETs is concentrated nightmare-fuel, with twisted life-cycles that provide a rich canvas for gnarly body horror — the zombie cat will live long in the memory, and you won't look at either sheep or water bottles in quite the same way.

Which is not to say that the Xenomorph itself is rendered obsolete — it's deployed early, then withdrawn, Hawley making restrained yet effective use of Giger's beast throughout the remaining episodes. Crucially, though, he positions the alien as neither antagonist nor narrative fulcrum, instead allowing its presence to serve as (admittedly deadly) scenery for a more compelling human story.

The city where the ship crashes is run by Prodigy, a corp just as unclouded by conscience, remorse or delusions of morality as the creature it covets. Its CEO, Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin) — barefoot, perpetually pyjama-clad — is chasing immortality, transferring the minds of terminally ill tweens into synthetic bodies (adults are too inflexible, we're told). It's through these Lost Boys (and Girls) that the series explores the nature of consciousness, mortality, humanity, and what happens when the last is stripped away. These 'Hybrids' prove a compelling contradiction: their bodies adult, their mannerisms child-like, superhuman strength and speed giving each petulant tantrum an undercurrent of menace.

First among them is Sydney Chandler's Wendy (the *Peter Pan* metaphor is anything but subtle), a mix of guileless naivety, wide-eyed wonder and flinty determinism — a hero owing as much to Newt as Ripley. Wendy's connections to her human brother (Alex Lawther) and the Xenomorph itself (she begins to learn its language in a gambit that's nowhere near as goofy as it sounds), combined with her dubious status as corporate property, leave her stranded between worlds. Meanwhile, Prodigy synthetic Kirsh (a snowy-haired Timothy Olyphant) has an uncertain agenda, and the Maginot's sole survivor, cyborg Morrow (Babou Ceesay), quietly emerges as an antagonist every bit as menacing as the eponymous extraterrestrial.

After successfully cosplaying the Coens with *Fargo*, Hawley shape-shifts here from Scott (slow dissolves, measured dread) to Cameron (gung-ho Marines, crackling pulse rifles), channelling both classics that birthed this franchise, while simultaneously imprinting the show with his own distinctive mark (power-chord needle drops include everything from Metallica to Jane's Addiction). Even the episode recaps are artfully crafted: discordant, vibe-based glimpses of key moments, rather than clumsy exposition.

The sum total of which is nothing short of a triumph. An *Alien* saga at once familiar and entirely fresh. An unsettling transhuman fable that stands on its own without aliens at all. An acutely cinematic experience, precision-tooled for hour-long instalments. If the drama's edge is somewhat blunted by prequel armour (we're under no illusion that a global infestation is imminent), and the nods to contemporary culture are occasionally jarring (a running gag from *Ice Age 4* is unexpected), none of it detracts from the larger whole. Rather than lessen the *Alien* canon, events here succeed in casting the inciting events of both *Alien* and *Aliens* in a chilling new light. What could be higher praise than that? **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT ***Andor* for *Alien*, Hawley's series is a rare prequel that serves to enrich its source material, breathing new life into a once-tired franchise. This is the *Alien* resurrection we've long been waiting for.**

WATCH FIRST

In addition to the *Alien* series, obviously, showrunner Noah Hawley has cited *2001: A Space Odyssey* as an influence, noting it was the first film he ever watched in a cinema, aged six.

Clockwise from main: Mum Tess (Jamie Lee Curtis) and daughter Anna (Lindsay Lohan) — or are they?; On the run: Harper (Julia Butters) and Lily (Sophia Hammons); Musical differences.

FILM

FREAKIER FRIDAY

BODY (SWAP) POSITIVITY

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **111 MINS**

DIRECTOR Nisha Ganatra
CAST Jamie Lee Curtis, Lindsay Lohan, Julia Butters, Sophia Hammons, Chad Michael Murray

PLOT Days before Anna's (Lohan) wedding, a psychic event forces her to switch minds with her daughter (Butters), while her mom (Curtis) swaps with Anna's future stepdaughter (Hammons).

AS A SWEET and silly teen comedy with a big heart and outrageously good original songs, *Freaky Friday* has endured over decades. Its special sauce came courtesy of a then-teenage Lindsay Lohan and parental Jamie Lee Curtis, whose combined chemistry and knack for physical comedy worked wonders for the film's body-swapping premise. It was a sparky partnership that called for a reunion, albeit under just the right circumstances.

Set in the modern day, *Freakier Friday* has the advantage of taking place some 20 years after its predecessor, when a new generation has arrived at teenagedom. As we learn via a scrapbook-style montage, that new generation is represented by Harper (Julia Butters), the surfing, beanie-sporting daughter of Lohan's single parent Anna. It's a fun set-up that allows for Curtis' cool therapist grandma, Tess, to inevitably overstep boundaries as she bonds with Harper at Anna's behest. Their wonky dynamic, which honours the forged closeness that Anna and Tess share after their maiden swap in the first film, works. Until, that is, Anna falls hard and fast for English restaurateur Eric (Manny Jacinto). An engagement, his prim daughter Lily (Sophia Hammons), and a move to London are suddenly in the picture.

The many plates *Freakier Friday* spins are an effort to make the premise work while pushing the film into a new era. The four-way swap — caused by an amateur psychic at Anna's bachelorette party — allows both Lohan and Curtis to once again shine with their free-wheeling charms as *both* are catapulted into younger bodies this time, squabbling and strutting awkwardly in bold, teen-skewing apparel. But the story could afford to let a few of those plates crash down; so concerned is the script with hitting fan-service beats while also trying to appeal to younger audiences that it doesn't give either enough space to breathe, instead bouncing between plot points with just a thin thread of narrative pulling it along.

Which isn't to say that it lacks magic. The return of Chad Michael Murray's blond biker love interest Jake creates one of the film's funniest scenes, as Lily's Tess whispers flirting tips to Harper's Anna, resulting in a dazzling showcase of Lohan's slapstick sensibilities. The years have done nothing to dampen her bond with Curtis, and it's a thrill to see them perform together again in a story that gives them a wide canvas to play on. Tropes like an outfit-changing montage, which in other movies might feel tired, are delightful here, especially with Lily's love of fashion driving Tess' pink sunglasses and safety-pin-adorned jackets. The supporting cast are commendable, especially Butters and Hammons holding up the adults-as-teens side of the story. But it succeeds above all else as a vehicle for its leading duo's polished attributes. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT Slightly chaotic plotting under-serves the story in places, but it's saved by an endlessly entertaining Lohan and Curtis.

PEACEMAKER: SEASON 2

★★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY/NOW)** / EPISODES VIEWED **5 OF 8**
SHOWRUNNER James Gunn
CAST John Cena, Danielle Brooks, Freddie Stroma, Jennifer Holland

There was some understandable uncertainty when James Gunn decided to focus a series around Peacemaker — the most abrasive member of the *Suicide Squad* crew — but its first season was an irreverent delight. Now, Christopher Smith and his merry band of well-meaning misfits are back for more episodes that exceed our expectations, from the more ambitious opening credits to a central narrative that uses alternate dimensions to deepen its introspection on the titular anti-hero in surprising and heartfelt ways. It's all anchored by a John Cena performance that finds the sweet spot between the silly and the vulnerable. For the moment, the Best Wrestler-Turned-Actor belt belongs to him. **AW**

TOGETHER

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **102 MINS**
DIRECTOR Michael Shanks
CAST Dave Franco, Alison Brie, Damon Herriman, Mia Morrissey

Love is icky. Love is gross. Love is feeling so completed by someone that you want to live in their skin. At least, according to Michael Shanks' bone-melding body horror *Together*. After a tumble into an H.R. Giger-esque cavern, newly engaged couple Tim and Millie (real-life married couple Dave Franco and Alison Brie) become physically drawn to each other in a manner that goes way further than anything sexual. A lot here may feel a bit like Body Horror For Beginners™, but when the film aims to make you squirm, it nails it. A fucked-up little love fable, its willingness to dig under the skin of its central relationship and actually interrogate it might just leave you wondering if the horrors we endure for love are worth it after all. **HS**

Pensioner power in action. **Below:** Naomi Ackie and Daniel Mays.

FILM

THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB

CSI: OAP

★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **12A** / **118 MINS**

DIRECTOR Chris Columbus
CAST Helen Mirren, Pierce Brosnan, Ben Kingsley, Celia Imrie, David Tennant, Jonathan Pryce, Naomi Ackie

PLOT A quartet of elderly amateur sleuths living in a luxury retirement home investigate the murder of a dodgy local businessman.

CHRIS COLUMBUS IS probably eclipsed only by Steven Spielberg (on producing duty here) as the unassuming master of the Millennial childhood classic. Having written *Gremlins* and *The Goonies,* he went on to direct *Adventures In Babysitting*, *Home Alone* and its sequel, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and, of course, the first two *Harry Potter* films. Though he recently traded in family fare for producing Robert Eggers' films, he's back in the director's chair with Netflix's glossy adaptation of *The Thursday Murder Club*. If it's been a while since you set foot in an airport bookshop, this is TV presenter Richard Osman's phenomenally popular cosy crime-book series. And it's easy to see why Columbus got the gig; although its protagonists are pensioners, palatial retirement home Coopers Chase resembles a certain magic boarding school and the film's chocolate box-y vision of England is almost as fantastical.

Joyce (Celia Imrie), a ditsy retired nurse, has just arrived at Coopers Chase and stumbles on the titular club analysing grisly evidence from cold cases instead of picking through jigsaw-puzzle pieces. Former MI6 boss Elizabeth (Helen Mirren) is impressed by Joyce's high tolerance for gore and brings her in, joining

socialist Ron (Pierce Brosnan) and psychiatrist Ibrahim (Ben Kingsley), with a bit of help from actual police officer PC De Freitas (Naomi Ackie). But we soon learn that Coopers Chase is under threat from sleazy owner Ian Ventham (a dastardly David Tennant) who wants to bulldoze it in favour of luxury flats, and when Ventham's business rival is bludgeoned to death, the club finds itself with a much hotter case to crack.

Perhaps needless to say, your mileage may vary when it comes to this level of twee, with endless slices of cake and a syrupy score when things get a bit sad. The dialogue seems purely expositional and the humour is very weak, a shame given it boasts a stacked cast of brilliant actors. Only Jonathan Pryce makes much of an impression in an understated turn as Elizabeth's husband Stephen, who lives with dementia.

The murder plot itself gets the job done, but a bigger mystery is how some of these characters can afford to live in such an unbelievably luxurious retirement home. The story asks us to be outraged that Coopers Chase could be replaced by high-end flats when that's essentially exactly what it consists of already. Suspension of disbelief is all well and good, but it's difficult to sympathise with the residents' plight when they clearly have money coming out of their ears.
LAURA VENNING

VERDICT **Maybe this would hit the spot for a Sunday-night sofa slump but it's more patronising than perceptive when it comes to portraying ageing. As disappointing as a stale scone.**

There are four of them and they're fantastic. What can we call them?

FILM

THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME (AGAIN)

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **114 MINS**

DIRECTOR Matt Shakman
CAST Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, Joseph Quinn, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Julia Garner, Ralph Ineson

PLOT The Fantastic Four are expecting a new family member — while taking on their greatest foe yet: Galactus, devourer of worlds.

DESPITE THE INSISTENCE of this latest *Fantastic Four* film's subtitle, it arrives carrying a distinct hint of déjà vu. Not least because 2007's so-so sequel *Rise Of The Silver Surfer* covered the very same Earth-threatening ground, with the same (very, very) big bad. But, just as you might worry how yet another *Fantastic Four* could serve up anything close to fresh, you might also take heart in the relieving fact that fourth time (okay, fifth if you count the never-released Roger Corman-produced movie) is a charm.

This is down to the casting and the world-building. One of Marvel Studios' strengths is finding the best people for the roles. After all, they know these long-storied characters better than anyone, and can sniff out their essence in actors that might at first not seem obvious. So, please welcome to the MCU: Pedro Pascal as Reed Richards, a socially awkward, softly spoken brainiac who's most comfortable using his bendy-stretchy powers to reach the furthest corners of his giant chalkboard while sciencing shit out. Former Princess Margaret Vanessa Kirby as Sue Storm, aka Mrs Richards, whose mother-bear energy finally confirms the Invisible Woman as the quartet's most powerful member. Joseph 'Eddie Munson' Quinn as Johnny Storm, thankfully freed from the cocksure hot-head stereotype (though he does now have a thing for "naked space women", specifically Julia Garner's frosty Silver Surfer); and *The Bear*'s Ebon Moss-Bachrach as the orange-rocky Ben Grimm, freed from the self-loathing that's shaded previous Things, allowing his orange-rocky heart to shine.

They are, it must be said, a chemistry-test-acing quartet. And it is a smart move to join them four years into their superheroic career. The "cosmic turbulence" origin story is skipped over via TV newsreels, so we join them as a tight, settled, fame-comfortable family unit which has more-or-less solved all the local crime problems... just before mega-foe Galactus (Ralph Ineson) moves into orbit. Rather like a certain other blue-suited superhero who returned to our screens this summer, they are presented as "the very best of us", and it is a joy to bathe in a little of their bright-hued optimism. Yet, unlike that certain other cape-fluttering-fella, the Four inhabit a world with no other known superpeople — something that hasn't happened in the MCU since it launched with *Iron Man*. For the first time in what for many viewers will feel like a lifetime, there is no movie/TV show cross-referencing required to fully appreciate this Marvel joint. As rewarding as that could be for those who can keep up, the decision to locate this story in an Avengers-free alternative universe makes it feel blessedly lighter and crisper than anything we've seen from Marvel Studios in quite a while.

Which brings us to the world-building. Similar to Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman*, director Matt Shakman and his team have constructed an entire environment, with a striking aesthetic, to echo and complement the main characters. Except where

KEEP 'EM PEELED

Watch closely during the Times Square scenes: one shop is named 'Westview Appliances Television', a reference to the fictional New Jersey town featured in the MCU TV series *WandaVision* (which was also directed by Matt Shakman).

Top to bottom: Somewhere inside there'd be a Greggs; Metal marvel the Silver Surfer (Julia Garner); Reed (Pedro Pascal), Sue (Vanessa Kirby) and baby Franklin (Ada Scott) Richards.

Keaton-Bats had a towering neo-Gothic Gotham, the F4 have a vivid, zippy, '60s-retrofuturistic sci-fi Manhattan. It's a city with flying cars and its own rocket launch pad, but where the fashion is pure *Mad Men*, the tech is mostly analogue, and the TV cartoons still jerkily hand-drawn. It's such a fun, well-crafted world that it almost feels a shame to anticipate Reed, Sue and co leaving it for next year's *Doomsday* shenanigans.

Speaking of supervillains, it is good to finally see Galactus done properly on the big screen — or rather, IMAX screen, evidently the only format large enough to handle the lofty space-git. *Rise Of The Silver Surfer* fudged the Eater Of Worlds as a vast cosmic fart, but here he's presented in all his Godzilla-sized-humanoid glory, courtesy of none other than Finchy from *The Office* himself, Ralph Ineson. Finchy could throw a kettle over a pub, but this guy could simply tread on the pub.

As you'd expect from its villain, there is an outsize, other-worldly flavour to the action, some of which takes place off-Earth — in a visual style that owes quite a bit to *Interstellar*. At times the CGI creaks, not least when locating baby Franklin Richards amid the fray, but there is less VFX slop than has recently tended to define the genre.

Besides, the focus is squarely on the family at the story's nucleus. If the script doesn't hit quite so many comedic high notes as some other Marvels, it at least brims with sincerity, presenting a heroic squad committed to protecting the Earth, while encouraging the whole world to link arms and do its bit, too. Those are the kind of heroes, it feels, that we need right now. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT With an exemplary cast and shiny new alt-universe to enjoy, this is the best *Fantastic Four* yet. And if that bar's too low for you, it's also the best Marvel movie in years.

Toxie channels his inner Wicked Witch. **Below:** Winston (Peter Dinklage) and stepson Wade (Jacob Tremblay).

FILM

THE TOXIC AVENGER

EARTH'S LEAST MIGHTIEST HERO

★★★

OUT **AUGUST 29** / CERT **18** / **102 MINS**

DIRECTOR Macon Blair
CAST Peter Dinklage, Jacob Tremblay, Taylour Paige, Julia Davis, Jonny Coyne, Elijah Wood, Kevin Bacon

PLOT Down-on-his-luck janitor Winston Gooze (Dinklage) mutates into an unexpected hero after being submerged in toxic waste.

AFTER OVER A DECADE of development diversions and distribution troubles, the reboot of much-loved 1980s midnight movie *The Toxic Avenger* is finally splattering onto screens — and while it's had a contemporary update in its core themes and special effects, it still retains the gory, spoofy silliness that made the original a cult hit.

Game Of Thrones' Peter Dinklage steps into the starring role as Winston Gooze, janitor at behemoth pharmaceutical factory BTH and widower stepdad to young Wade (*Room*'s Jacob Tremblay). When Winston is diagnosed with a terminal brain condition, he's dismayed to find his health insurance doesn't cover the treatment. After a series of events involving a pink tutu, a glowing green mop and a half-arsed robbery, Winston ends up chucked into a vat of BTH's goopy industrial waste — and emerges as the green-skinned, super-strong 'Toxic Avenger', set to seek vengeance on those who've wronged him.

The tone here is endlessly goofy, heightened and self-aware, with every inch of the film packed with Easter eggs nodding to the 1984 film, and lots of fun details — from the literal place names ('Depressing Outskirts', 'Yonder Spooky Woods') to the throwaway gags (a reference to syphilis instead of Sisyphus) and cartoonish

costume design. Writer-director Macon Blair conjures a hellish, off-kilter vision of America; one that's drowning in inequality, soundtracked by 'monster-core' rap metal and pushing back against corporate negligence. Bizarre as it sounds, think *Deadpool* meets *Dark Waters*, and you're kinda halfway there.

Dinklage is convincing as Winston, the grieving, well-meaning loser trying to connect with his stepson, and movement artist Luisa Guerreiro is great as the physical body underneath the pile of prosthetics after he transforms into 'Toxie'. *Zola*'s Taylour Paige is strong as straight-faced BTH whistleblower J.J., Elijah Wood is weirdly empathetic as stringy-haired fixer Fritz, and Kevin Bacon and Brit comedy icon Julia Davis are clearly having fun as unhinged villains Bob Garbinger and assistant Kissy.

As schlocky as *The Toxic Avenger* is, the entire cast appear to be on exactly the same page as Blair in knowing the parodic but sincere vibe they're going for, and it's their commitment to the bit that makes it work. The violence *is* eye-poppingly gory, but the super-stylised execution makes it more comedic than harrowing, and the 102-minute runtime zips by. There's basically zero character depth, the plot manages to be both barely-there and overstuffed, and the sheer weirdness of it all might be a turn-off for some. But, as juvenile and gonzo as the humour is, just like Toxie himself, this movie has a kind heart, and that's more than enough to win over original fans and *TA* newbies alike. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT An entertaining, frivolous ride through a wacky, well-realised world, *The Toxic Avenger* is a charming underdog story offering plenty of laughs. The very opposite of toxic.

Big Panther energy.
Below: Special forces: Dora Milaje warriors.

TV

EYES OF WAKANDA

DO THE EYES HAVE IT?

★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 4**

SHOWRUNNER Todd Harris
CAST Winnie Harlow, Cress Williams, Larry Herron, Adam Michael Gold, Jacques Colimon, Jona Xiao, Zeke Alton, Steve Toussaint

PLOT A group of Wakandan warriors known as the Hatut Zaraze leave their homeland behind to retrieve vibranium artefacts lost to history.

WAKANDA, FAMOUSLY, IS forever. So it makes sense that Wakandans' adventures can go backwards in time as well as forward. In *Eyes Of Wakanda* — a four-part animated anthology series which expands the mythology first put properly on screen in *Black Panther* — the scope is not limited to the present day, or even Wakanda itself.

Developed and executive-produced by Ryan Coogler, the series thrusts us into an Afrofuturist world of the past, from ancient Crete to 19th century Ethiopia and beyond, where warriors from Black Panther's homeland fight to reclaim what they hold most dear. The focus here is on new characters rather than recognisable heroes, and for the most part that pays off, thanks to some snappy writing and strong voice-acting; Jacques Colimon, in particular, has a lot of fun voicing the warrior Basha, a cocky spy who doesn't take life too seriously; while Winnie Harlow also impresses as Noni, a former member of the Dora Milaje who could have easily led the whole series.

The animation here is strong. Eschewing the flat, occasionally stilted style of *What If...?*, the animators instead draw inspiration from contemporary African-American artists such as Ernie Barnes to evoke a hand-painted (if

computer-generated) style, evocative of traditional Disney. The result is gorgeous to look at and culturally resonant, forging a distinct identity that parallels the recognisable Wakandan elements we've seen in live-action. This fluidity also extends to the fights, which makes full use of the freedom animation allows to exhilarating effect.

While the focus is largely Wakandan, that's not to say everything here is entirely outside of the wider MCU mythos, especially with some fan-friendly second-half twists. For what could have been a by-the-numbers standalone project, some of the choices made here by showrunner Todd Harris are genuinely thrilling — choices that mean you'll never look at Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* films in the same way again.

But beyond the breakneck action, the story itself almost moves too fast, covering huge swathes of time and space in only four half-hour episodes. Just when you emotionally connect to a character, *Eyes Of Wakanda* swiftly moves onto the next adventure. Extra episodes could have deepened those connections and made the most of this open-ended premise. Instead, what we're left with is a promising start that will likely seem disposable to casual viewers. That's unfortunate because at its best, *Eyes Of Wakanda* represents the true potential of Marvel's small-screen efforts, expanding the MCU in ways that ensure Wakanda and this universe at large could go on indefinitely. **DAVID OPIE**

VERDICT **Without a popular hero to lead with, *Eyes Of Wakanda* instead relies on the infinite potential of the Wakandan brand to great effect; the result is beautifully crafted but feels somewhat incomplete.**

TV

CHIEF OF WAR

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **9 OF 9**
SHOWRUNNER Thomas Pa'a Sibbett
CAST Jason Momoa, Luciane Buchanan, Te Ao o Hinepehinga, Temuera Morrison

It feels fitting that Jason Momoa's best performance yet is based on a real-life figure who forever changed the history of his native Hawaii. Momoa — who co-created the series, co-writes, and co-directs — plays Ka'iana, a warrior chief charged with uniting warring Hawaiian kingdoms in the face of European colonisation. Torn between worlds, this mountain of a figure commands every frame, whether conversing in the Ōlelo Hawai'i native language or flinging himself into combat with only a loincloth. But while the detail is very sharp, the plotting meanders between set-pieces. *Chief Of War* cuts a brutal swathe through vital chapters of history— but you wish the quieter moments carried as much weight as each barbaric battle. **DO**

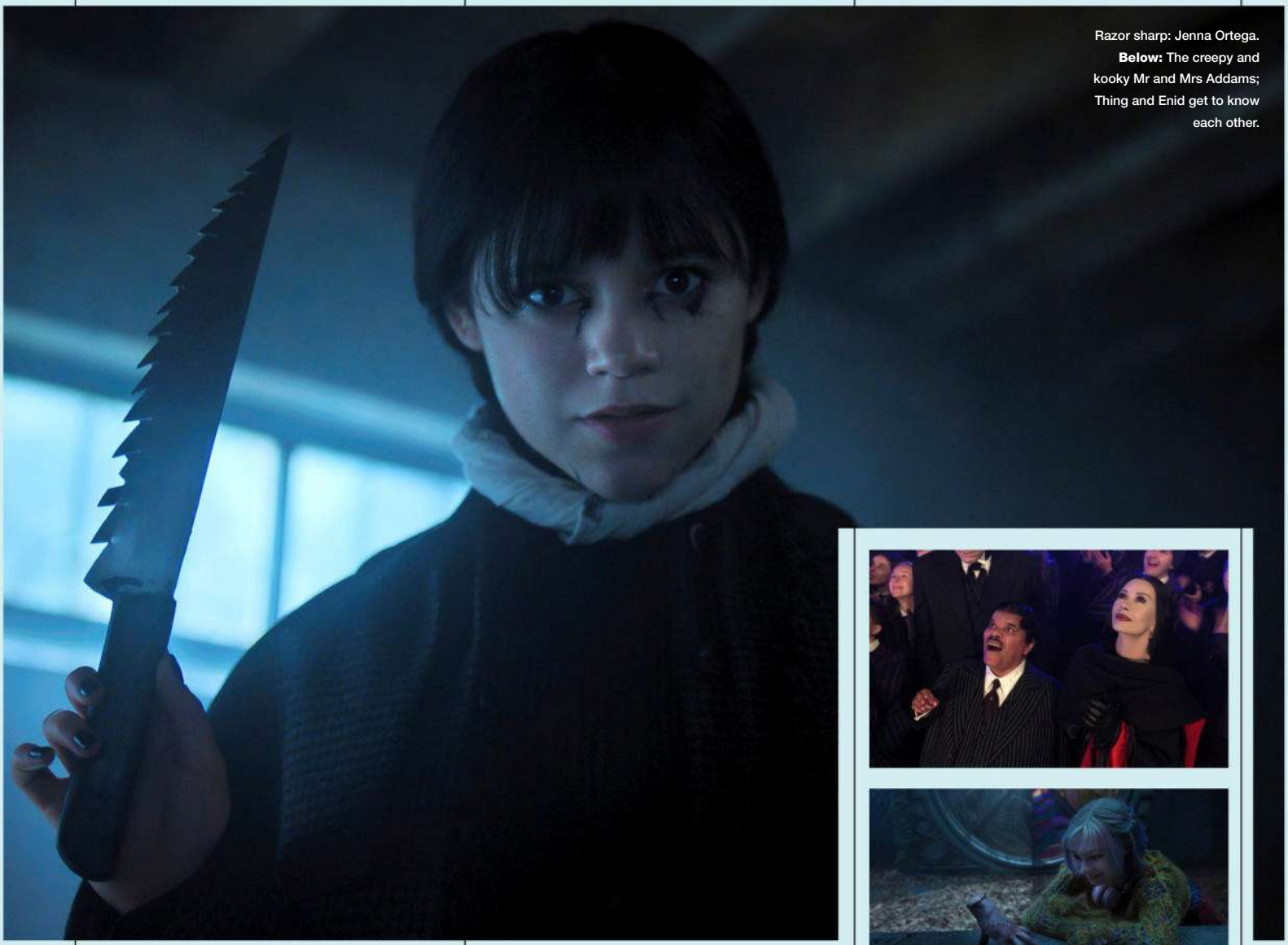
FILM

WAR OF THE WORLDS

★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **TBC** / **90 MINS**
DIRECTOR Rich Lee
CAST Ice Cube, Eva Longoria, Clark Gregg, Iman Benson

It's a copper-bottomed Hollywood pitch: what if the fate of America was riding on Ice Cube's ability to cut and paste really fast? There's tons of typing in this Amazon re-do of H.G. Wells' *The War Of The Worlds*, the alien invasion seen from the POV of the desktop of Cube's domestic-terror analyst. Depicting the attack via security cameras, phones, Facebook and CNN reports, the result is a Roland Emmerich-esque epic shot on 13 per cent battery. There are interesting updates — the red weed and killer virus get a fun modern makeover — but mostly it's an ill-conceived effort with cheapo special effects, dumbass plotting, terrible dialogue, bad performances and a climax that sees an Amazon service save the day. Prime nonsense. **IF**



Razor sharp: Jenna Ortega. **Below:** The creepy and kooky Mr and Mrs Addams; Thing and Enid get to know each other.

TV

WEDNESDAY: SEASON 2, PART 1

THE TEEN GOTH QUEEN IS BACK ON OUR SCREENS

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 4**

SHOWRUNNERS Alfred Gough, Miles Millar
CAST Jenna Ortega, Emma Myers, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Luis Guzmán, Steve Buscemi

PLOT Wednesday (Ortega) faces up to an ominous premonition regarding roommate Enid (Myers), and investigates murders committed by a crow.

IT FEELS BIZARRE that *Wednesday* returns at a time when Halloween is still months away. The show that became a runaway Netflix hit — while creatively reinvigorating director Tim Burton and turning Jenna Ortega into a generational star — radiates creepy, kooky and altogether ooky vibes, spinning the *Addams Family* character into her own *Harry Potter*-for-goth-kids YA detective series with hugely fun results. But *Wednesday*'s return at the height of summer speaks to Netflix's blockbuster approach for the show's second season — much bigger and starrier, a *Stranger Things*-like glow-up in scope, with mixed results.

The not-so-secret weapon in Season 1 was Ortega herself — knockout casting, elevating the material with deliciously deadpan delivery. She remains excellent, relishing every cutting line. "It's Addams with two Ds," she declares. "Like 'padded room'." We're reunited with Wednesday during her idea of summer fun — facing down a serial killer — before it's back to Nevermore Academy, the supernatural boarding school where she seems to attract all things mysterious and spooky.

The Hogwarts-like surroundings once again provide a cosy world for the series to inhabit — but in these first four episodes of Season 2, those stone walls are fielding too many stories, as various new characters, guest-stars-turned-season-regulars and old favourites jostle for attention in overstuffed episodes. There's Steve Buscemi as incoming Nevermore headteacher Barry Dort, whose "How do you do, fellow kids?" energy seems to hide something more sinister; Wednesday's little brother Pugsley (Isaac Ordonez), now a Nevermore student too, who has accidentally revived a clockwork-hearted zombie he names 'Slurp'; and fan-favourite wolf-girl Enid (Emma Myers). And that's only the half of it.

All of the constituent parts of *Wednesday* are entertaining. Its light tone and ghoulish humour make for a good time, the production values are lavish, and casting across the board is second to none. And Burton — who directs all four episodes — is clearly having a blast. But the super-sized approach of Season 2 often leaves Wednesday herself feeling like an afterthought. Morticia and Gomez Addams (the excellent Catherine Zeta-Jones and Luis Guzmán) are overused, seriously cramping Wednesday's style. Key players feel a bit forgotten in the influx of new faces; there's a slight disconnect between the show's grisliest moments and its teen-drama leanings; and Netflix's half-season approach means this Part stops when things have only just got going. Hopefully future instalments stitch the body-parts together more evenly. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT ***Wednesday*** **goes big in a second season that so far bites off more brains than it can chew. Still, worth it to watch Buscemi groove to 'Dancing In The Dark'.**

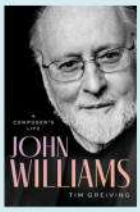
BOOKS

JOHN WILLIAMS: A COMPOSER'S LIFE

A DEEP DIVE INSIDE THE THEME MACHINE

★★★★★

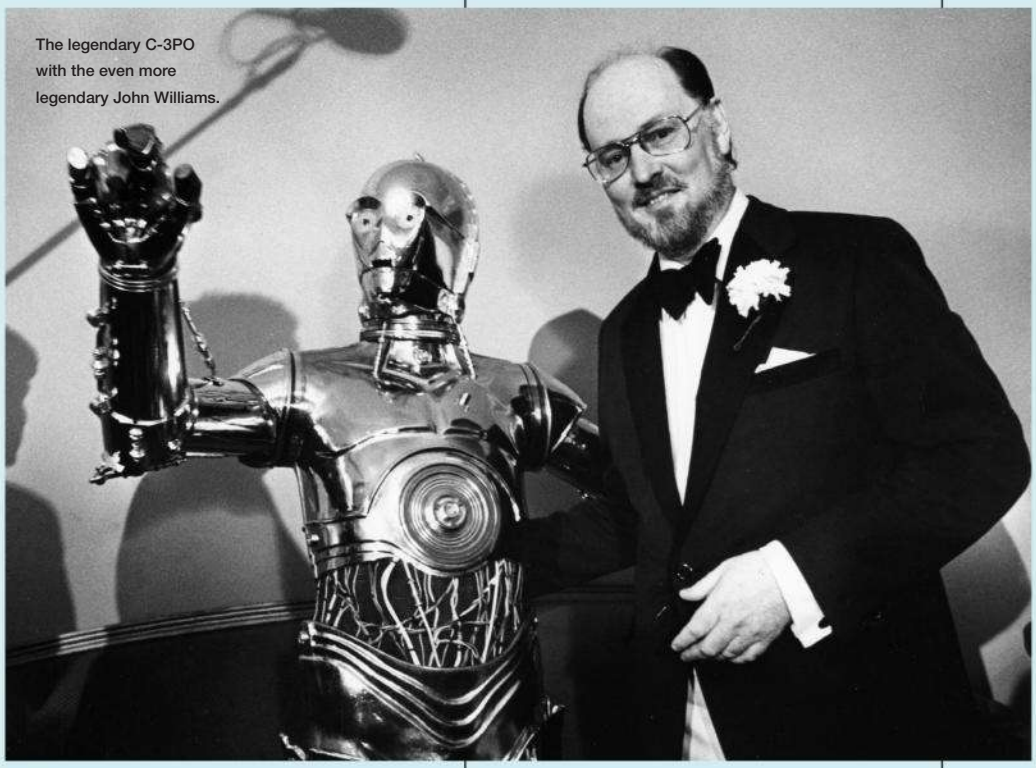
AUTHOR **TIM GREIVING**



THE FIRST JOHN Williams biography in the English language, film-music journalist Tim Greiving's exhaustive study of the world's most popular composer is a masterwork. Allying extensive, exclusive access to Williams with great storytelling, intelligent analysis and a deep love for its subject, it's as gripping and essential as Williams' best themes are catchy.

Throughout, Greiving sensibly doesn't cast Williams as an innate genius. Instead, he etches how his talent has been shaped by his life-choices (joining the Air Force band refined his sense of the march, a key musical motif), his mentors and his collaborators, all wrapped up in rigorous self-discipline and an unswerving passion for music. Perhaps the biggest impact on his art (and heart) came with the death of Barbara, his wife of 18 years, in 1974. Described by Williams as "the most profound experience of my life", for Greiving, the tragedy infused the subsequent music with deep wells of emotion not previously present.

Greiving expertly charts Williams' rise from his days on the jazz scene to his stint as a studio musician and orchestrator to piping-hot TV composer. Then, from Williams' first feature score (*Daddy-O*) to his last to date (*Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny*), each work gets a satisfying exploration, Greiving wearing his musical scholarship lightly (he dubs 'The Imperial March' the 'Hey Jude' of Williams' output).

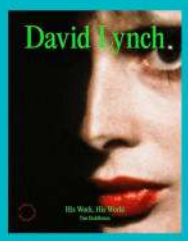


The legendary C-3PO with the even more legendary John Williams.

For all the erudition, there is lots of vibrant colour and trivia aplenty. Williams is an inveterate nickname-giver: during *Close Encounters*, Spielberg became 'The Little Stinker'; Williams considered but rejected scoring, among others, De Palma's *Mission: Impossible*, *Titanic* and *Up*; the composer was also reportedly disappointed by the manipulation of his *Star Wars* themes in *Rogue One*. But perhaps the biggest revelation is that Williams would have preferred to score Richard Attenborough's *A Bridge Too Far* over *Star Wars* but didn't want to let down The Little Stinker, who had recommended him to his pal George Lucas. If modern movie music has a *Sliding Doors* moment, this is it.

Weaving through the book is Williams' career-long push-and-pull between the populism of film scores and the seriousness of classical music, somehow uniting the two worlds. Greiving also tackles the brickbats directed at Williams, be it plagiarism from the composing greats or the "they-all-sound-the-same" chestnut. It's not a toothless study. The later works come in for criticism, but this is mostly an affectionate but perceptive love-in. Frankly, it's the book Williams' monumental talent deserves. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT You may know the tunes, but Greiving's clear-eyed study brilliantly illuminates the man and his mastery. Bravo!



DAVID LYNCH: HIS WORK, HIS WORLD

★★★★★

AUTHOR **TOM HUDDLESTON**

Writer Tom Huddleston, an avowed David Lynch fanatic, writes insightfully and passionately in this fascinating potted history of the late, beloved filmmaker: from the art student who would wear three neckties, to the artist obsessed with old factories, to the director of the odd pregnancy-test ad, to the avant-garde majesty of *Mullholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks*. A must for Lynch-pins. **JN**

THE WORLDS OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI

★★★★

AUTHOR **NICOLAS RAPOLD**

"Every Miyazaki movie is a portal to another world," writes Nicolas Rapold. Some of said portals are the basis for this beautiful book. Side-by-side photos show the rich, varied inspirations for the director's storied career — from *Alice in Wonderland*'s Cheshire Cat morphing into the Catbus to a real Tokyo bathhouse influencing *Spirited Away*. Elegantly designed and thoughtfully written, it would sit well on any Ghibli fan's shelf. **JN**

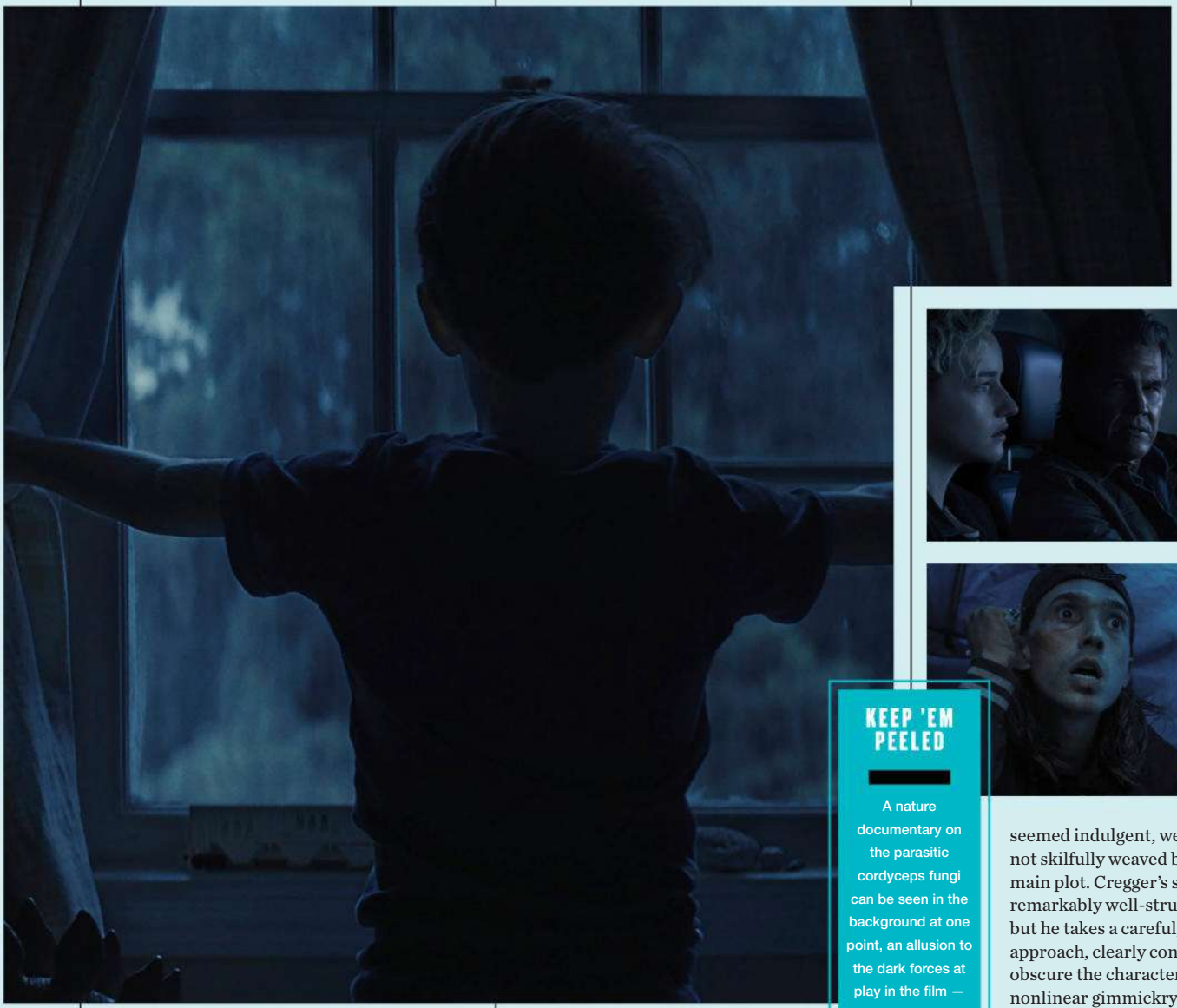
EVERYTHING AND THE KITCHEN SINK

★★★

AUTHOR **SIMON MATTHEWS**

The period between World War II and the Swinging Sixties saw an explosion of activity in British film, theatre and music: the 'angry young man' suddenly came into vogue, and working-class voices were given a cultural platform. This period is catalogued with rigour and deep wells of knowledge in Simon Matthews' social-history book — though it occasionally suffers from a dry, slightly academic approach. **JN**

Getty Images



Clockwise from main: "They're here..."; Car trouble; The horror.

FILM

WEAPONS

ZACH CREGGER RETURNS, FULLY ARMED

★★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT 18 / **128 MINS**

DIRECTOR Zach Cregger
CAST Josh Brolin, Julia Garner, Cary Christopher, Alden Ehrenreich, Austin Abrams, Benedict Wong, Amy Madigan

PLOT When 17 children from one class at Maybrook Elementary School inexplicably disappear overnight, the community reels. What really happened?

WEAPONS FIRES ITS starting shot almost immediately. An opening prologue, told by an unseen child narrator, explains what it claims is a "true story" in which "a lot of people die in a lot of really weird ways". Then we witness the inciting incident: one night, at 2.17am, 17 school kids from the fictional town of Maybrook wake up, walk out of their homes and run off into the night, arms eerily outstretched, destination unknown — soundtracked, ominously and strangely sweetly, to George Harrison's 'Beware Of Darkness'.

So begins Zach Cregger's second feature film as a solo director (not counting his co-directing credit on the much-maligned 2009 Playboy Mansion sex-comedy *Miss March*). This is a story on a much grander canvas than 2022's superb *Barbarian*, and even more narratively playful than that film's midway rug-pull, unravelling the mystery of the missing children across seven chapters, each focusing on a different character across a roughly concurrent *Rashomon*-ish timeline.

It begins almost like a thriller, gripping and jittery, with palpable anger and grief over the absent kids seizing the town. Blame initially falls on the teacher, Justine (Julia Garner, excellent), whose entire class has disappeared save for one hapless boy, and it's her perspective we join first, followed by Archer (Josh Brolin), a parent of one of the missing, whose obsessive hunt for his son leads him down some dark paths.

Playing episodically, with a cliffhanger at the end of each chapter, the intrigue builds exponentially, as seeming side characters get their own focus in a move that might have seemed indulgent, were they not skilfully weaved back into the main plot. Cregger's script is remarkably well-structured, but he takes a careful, crafted approach, clearly conscious not to obscure the characters with any nonlinear gimmickry.

It is a masterful balancing of tones, too. This is a serious film, with allusions to school shootings, police brutality, alcoholism, drug addiction and grief, though handled more gently and thoughtfully than *Barbarian*'s timely themes. It is an effectively scary one when it wants to be too, including a handful of violent moments that will have you squirming (*Weapons* sees *Evil Dead Rise*'s cheese grater and raises it a vegetable peeler).

And yet somehow it is also very funny, with flashes of disarming gallows humour (spot the copy of *Willow* on DVD), an unexpectedly camp antagonist, and an astonishing, cathartic, outrageously well-staged finale, where all the tension of the previous two hours finally boils over, a climax which ought to have audiences standing up and cheering in the aisles. The entire film, in fact, is something that shouldn't work, but does. Can a film about missing children and grief be called a crowd-pleaser? In Zach Cregger's hands, it feels almost effortless.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **A hugely accomplished horror achievement, and a significant step up from *Barbarian*: tense, sad, hilarious, unsettling, ridiculously entertaining, and ultimately oddly uplifting.**

KEEP 'EM PEELED

A nature documentary on the parasitic cordyceps fungi can be seen in the background at one point, an allusion to the dark forces at play in the film — and the same genus of fungi that can be found in *The Last Of Us*.

GAMES

DEATH STRANDING 2: ON THE BEACH

MORE DYSTOPIAN DELIVERY DELIGHTS

★★★

PS5

Baby blues.

MANY OF US opted for virtual escapes during lockdown. For some, it was connecting with friends (and falling victim to debt-imposing raccoon Tom Nook) on an island paradise in *Animal Crossing*. For others, it was stepping into the boots of a lone porter, delivering cargo across a dystopian future America. *Death Stranding*, released just before the pandemic, saw players reconnecting a fractured world at a time when we'd never felt more isolated. Six years later, *Death Stranding 2: On The Beach* arrives into a post-pandemic world. It's a solid sequel, albeit one that struggles to have the same impact as the original.

The (still gonzo) story picks up 11 months after the first game. Sam (Norman Reedus) is again tasked with rebuilding the links within a country — this time Australia — and it's not long before he's back to his old tricks, trekking across the landscape fulfilling the role of a dystopian delivery driver. If the gameplay clicks (and for some, it certainly will), it's easy to get swept up in the satisfaction of delivering post-apocalyptic parcels while dodging robots, robbers and the odd spectral whale.

There's something deeply rewarding in its cargo-management system and how some careful preparation can turn near-failure into success. You're stranded off the grid, your trike's out of power, and you're clinging to ropes and ladders to survive, finally making it to your destination against all odds, with precisely packed cargo intact. Later, gliding back over that same terrain thanks to a zipline network you've built yourself provides quite the giddy sense of achievement.

Firefights are more frequent in *On The Beach* — a notable change from the first game, where killing a human could lead to a 'voidout', literally causing the map to explode. It's refreshing to be able to unload bullets into enemies without the worry of wiping out half of Alice Springs. Minor gameplay tweaks aside, though, *On The Beach*'s biggest surprise is how familiar it all feels: from set-up, to the villain, and even the first game's dreamlike boss sequences. Those expecting a huge leap in game mechanics or story will find little innovation here. The highlight, however, is again the social elements. Asking other porters to finish deliveries (which, in more film-director-cameos, you'll receive from the likes of Mike Flanagan and the Philippou brothers) or build structures remains a wonderful, unspoken language between players who'll never meet. And when a bridge suddenly materialises across that pain-in-the-arse river mere hours after you requested it, you'll feel doubly inclined to pay it forward and return the favour for someone else. **HARRY STAINER**

VERDICT **Amplifies both the highs and lows of its predecessor, but to those tuned into its unique frequency, it offers a mad, meditative experience that's well worth connecting with.**

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3+4

★★★★

PC, PS4/5, NINTENDO SWITCH, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES S|X

Finally. Five years after *Pro Skater 1+2* remastered the ollie-to-kickflip combo of the legendary first two Tony Hawk games, its follow-ups get a similar treatment. While *3* and *4* aren't quite as classic, it's another high-scoring bout of nostalgic joy, largely faithful (though *4*'s open-world approach is excised, and some music is changed), addictive, and better-looking than ever. Rad! **BT**

DONKEY KONG BANANZA

★★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH 2

Donkey Kong's first solo outing since 2014 sees the great ape digging deep into a 'hollow-Earth' adventure. *Banaza* mixes *Mario*-style platforming with a fully destructible environment, allowing DK to rip apart mountains with his paws, while bizarre transformations — into a flying ostrich, say — keep things fresh. All the digging can wear thin, but colourful spectacle and inventive design make this a chest-thumping joy. **MK**

BACK TO THE DAWN

★★★★

PC, XBOX SERIES X

Ignore the funny animals — this anthropomorphic prison-escape RPG rivals Tarantino's grittiness. As investigative reporter Thomas The Fox, or undercover detective Bob The Panther, you must navigate rival gangs and corrupt guards to survive incarceration. Crafting, survival and turn-based combat mechanics offer variety, but it's having to make morally compromising choices that sears this into your memory. **MK**

"... due to trespassers on the line." That old chestnut.

FILM

HIGHEST 2 LOWEST

SPIKE AND DENZEL, REUNITED — AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

★★★★

OUT **SEPTEMBER 5** / CERT **TBC** / **133 MINS**

DIRECTOR Spike Lee
CAST Denzel Washington, Jeffrey Wright, A$AP Rocky, Ilfenesh Hadera, Aubrey Joseph

PLOT Music mogul David King (Washington) is crafting a deal to cement his legacy when a ransom demand for his son abruptly derails his plans.

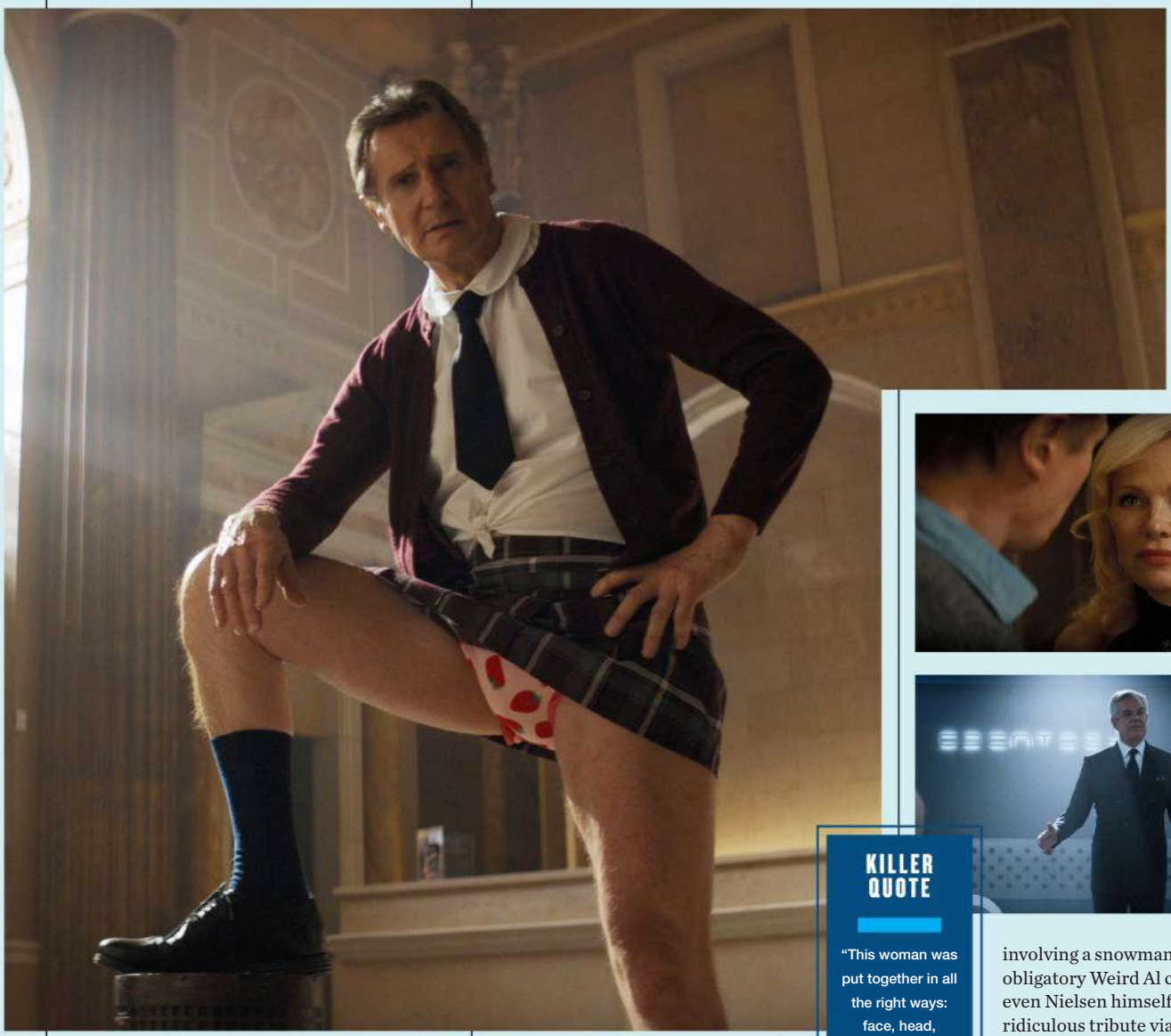
SPIKE LEE'S LATEST joint is, above all, a celebration. He fêtes New York in his first hometown film in a decade, and his longtime collaborator, Denzel Washington. He pays off his longterm admiration for Akira Kurosawa, in a loose remake of the Japanese director's 1963 noir *High And Low*. Lee even decks out his hero's base in the blue and orange of his beloved New York Knicks. For all the high stakes and desperate moments of this thrilling crime drama, its filmmaker is having the time of his life.

Not that that's immediately obvious. We meet Washington's David King in his Brooklyn penthouse, planning the biggest deal of his career alongside his wife Pam (Ilfenesh Hadera) and earnest son Trey (Aubrey Joseph). King is pressured and fast-talking, taking another huge risk in a career filled with them. Mere hours later, a kidnapping has put all his plans on hold, and detectives are swarming his house, recommending that he pay a ransom that threatens everything he's worked for. It makes for an extremely tense first act, with King and his family facing a horrible dilemma and little sense that any of this is going to end well; an impression furthered by the worsening grimaces of the usually unflappable Washington. But Lee has surprises in store.

As the mystery unfolds, he shuffles the tone between noir, action, revenge drama and something that feels very much like a musical. Admittedly, that's signalled early on: Lee opens with a soaring rendition of 'Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin'' over cinematographer Matthew Libatique's Technicolor-looking New York, drenched in warmth and promise. His regular composer Howard Drossin creates a lush and at times almost overbearing score, more akin to a 1950s Western epic or Broadway blockbuster than a hip-hop drama. That's before we get to the outright performance scenes, huge outdoor dance extravaganza or the confrontation that plays close to a rap battle.

But it's not just style; the substance is all here. Lee is interested in what a legacy looks like, and in what makes the work worth the effort. There are reflections about good money versus bad, about the gap between reputation and self-respect and between art and commerce, and how social media might change that calculus. Washington's King plays out every ounce of the subtext in a performance that combines furious commitment and a sense of lightness, like jazz. The final result could perhaps lose a few minutes for a tighter running time and a little more focus, but that's nitpicking. The overwhelming final impression, from top to bottom and highest 2 lowest, is of the sheer joy Lee takes in his work and all the glorious possibilities it affords. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **Denzel Washington's unshakeable gravitas anchors a dazzling, jazzy riff on the crime drama that somehow feels wildly uplifting for all its grit.**



Clockwise from main: Berry silly; Cops and women don't mix...?; "One meellion dollars..." Evil billionaire Richard Cane (Danny Huston).

FILM

THE NAKED GUN

A CHIP OFF THE OLD COP

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **85 MINS**

DIRECTOR Akiva Schaffer
CAST Liam Neeson, Pamela Anderson, Paul Walter Hauser, Kevin Durand, Danny Huston, CCH Pounder

PLOT Detective Frank Drebin Jr (Neeson) and new acquaintance Beth Davenport (Anderson) take on evil billionaire Richard Cane (Huston) — and his mysterious P.L.O.T. device.

1988's *THE NAKED GUN* — and to a lesser extent its confusingly numbered sequels, *2½* and *33⅓* — from the Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker team, are rightly revered as parody classics. They are also, it has to be said, relics of a bygone era: when comedy films still ruled the roost, when spoof was a genre in rude health, when it hadn't been weakened by years of cheap knock-offs and straight-to-streaming slop. Comedy, the received wisdom goes, does not belong in a cinema anymore.

Perhaps conscious of this pressure, *The Naked Gun*, 2025 edition, opens a little hesitantly, with an action scene introducing Detective Frank Drebin Jr (Liam Neeson), son of the original Drebin (Leslie Nielsen), disguised as a schoolgirl. The sequence doffs a cap to the 1988 film's effortlessly enjoyable pre-titles fight, without quite matching its fluidity or funnies. But the good thing about a film like this is, if you're not vibing with one joke, you don't have to wait long for another to come along. The comedy density here is thicker than a well-stuffed beaver.

The Lonely Island's Akiva Schaffer is on co-writing and directing duties for this 'requel', and he's the perfect choice: a proven master of parody and long-time comedy cognoscente who captures the hallmarks of the series handsomely. There is the delightfully over-literal wordplay ("UCLA?" "I see LA every day. I live here"). There's the old detective trope of a character describing a beautiful woman in narration, taken to its ludicrous logical conclusion here. There are oodles of visual gags, background nonsense happening as perfunctory dialogue plays in the foreground. There are nosedives into the valleys of the surreal (look out for a particularly bizarre sequence involving a snowman). There's the obligatory Weird Al cameo. There's even Nielsen himself, given a fittingly ridiculous tribute via a framed photo — and in the reincarnation of an owl.

But Schaffer isn't afraid to shake things up. The smoky-jazz soundtrack is still here, but what was once a straight TV cop-show spoof now also nods to the likes of *Mission: Impossible* and *The Dark Knight*. It also acknowledges that police no longer hold wide public esteem ("Since when do cops have to follow the law?" asks an incredulous Drebin at one point). And Neeson's Drebin Jr is harder-nosed, with more gravelly gravitas than Nielsen's old-fashioned take; albeit obsessed with *Buffy* and the Black Eyed Peas.

As demonstrated in *Life's Too Short*, Neeson is superb at wink-free deadpan comedy and leads from the front, the entire ensemble matching him. They are all cannily cast too, each lead essentially doing a piss-take of their more dramatic roles, from Neeson's grizzled cops to Pamela Anderson's sultry sexpots to Danny Huston's scowling baddies to CCH Pounder's desk-slamming police chiefs. The result is a film that has a better chance of producing a belly laugh than any in recent memory: one that deserves, as Drebin would say, "20 years for man's laughter". **JOHN NUGENT**

KILLER QUOTE

"This woman was put together in all the right ways: face, head, shoulders, knees and toes. And a bottom that would make any toilet beg for the brown."
FRANK DREBIN JR (LIAM NEESON)

VERDICT **Watching this affectionately silly reboot-sequel is like swimming in raw sewage. Which is to say, you'll love it.**

It was acceptable in the '90s. **Below:** The Subway *can* get very hot.

FILM

CAUGHT STEALING

IS IT ARO-NO-FSKY OR ARO-YES-FSKY?

★★★

OUT **AUGUST 29** / CERT **15** / **107 MINS**

DIRECTOR Darren Aronofsky
CAST Austin Butler, Zoë Kravitz, Matt Smith, Regina King, Liev Schreiber, Vincent D'Onofrio

PLOT 1998, New York. Bartender Hank (Butler) agrees to look after punk neighbour Russ' (Smith) cat for a few days — when a case of mistaken identity spirals his entire life out of control.

DARREN ARONOFSKY ISN'T a director who tends to cut loose. His comfort zone is exploring the darkest depths of misery (*Requiem For A Dream*), Biblical apocalypses (*Noah*, *mother!*), and characters chasing oblivion (*The Wrestler*). But while there are typically Aronofskian themes at play in *Caught Stealing*, it is, ostensibly, the filmmaker having *fun* — a gritty, pacy, propulsive crime thriller, adapted from Charlie Huston's novel, that grabs Austin Butler by the ankles and drags him screaming further and further into New York's criminal underbelly. It's quite the pivot from 2022's *The Whale*.

This being Aronofsky, it's a particularly stressful type of fun. There are shades of *After Hours* and *Uncut Gems* in the escalating anxiety-nightmare stakes that Butler's bartender Hank faces across his urban odyssey. A reluctant agreement to cat-sit for neighbour Russ (a mohawked Matt Smith on brilliantly brash form) has deadly consequences when Russian mobsters turn up and beat Hank to a pulp — just the beginning of his pain.

It's that commitment to pain that makes *Caught Stealing* a true Aronofsky film; not only

does the violence hit hard, with bone-crunching sound effects, but it's clear Hank has become numb to his own agony. His relationship with alcohol is unhealthy. Trauma from his youth wakes him up screaming every morning. The film asks whether Hank can get his shit together and move forward — hope for a brighter future represented by Zoë Kravitz, on sparkling form as Hank's almost-girlfriend, paramedic Yvonne. Unfortunately, the world seems intent on dragging him to hell, as successively shifty criminal figures emerge to ruin his life.

Aronofsky puts pedal to the metal here, with often thrilling results. This is easily his most accessible work since *Black Swan*, more akin to David Fincher in *Panic Room* or *The Game* mode. It's beautifully lensed by Matthew Libatique, wallowing in the grime and grit of NYC, shot on location in the Big Apple; Butler balances Hank as a sympathetic lead, a frustrating fuck-up, and a capable quick-thinker when the mayhem begins; and the intensity is ratcheted up by a friction-fuelled soundtrack by British post-punkers Idles.

Which makes it all the more frustrating that *Caught Stealing* almost fatally kneecaps itself so early on, with an end-of-Act-1 turn that threatens to deflate the whole affair. A seismic plot development drains nearly all the emotional investment built up, leaving a sour taste in the mouth just when the madness kicks into gear. It's hard to get beyond. Perhaps that sourness is what Aronofsky relishes — even in fun mode, he can't help but be drawn to the abyss. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT **For the most part, *Caught Stealing* is a riotous, rollicking ride studded with New York's concrete grit — but its sharper edges prove more difficult to endure.**

also out

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I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER

★★ FILM

"'Nostalgia's overrated,' warns this vacuous slasher with a wink. Trouble is, other than obnoxious characters meeting immemorable ends, that's all it has to offer. Perhaps a full reboot might have been better." **MATT GLASBY**

HAPPY GILMORE 2

★★★ FILM

"Like any Adam Sandler comedy film made this century, it never ascends higher than 'hit-and-miss', and there are some long stretches spent in the rough. But what it lacks in precision or panache, it makes up for in sheer goofy, golf-y geniality." **JOHN NUGENT**

THE ASSASSIN

★★★★ TV

"It's in the verbal sparring matches where the show has the most fun. There are killer set-pieces here — yet it's how the series plays with gender and genre that marks it out as something worth making time for." **DAVID OPIE**

THE PICKUP

★★ FILM

"Eddie Murphy is largely responsible for the popularity of action-comedies in their modern form. But here he is unwisely placed in the role of the straight man, his natural comedic gifts mainly muzzled. *The Pickup* would be better off being left unpicked." **JOHN NUGENT**

MOTHERBOARD

★★★★ FILM

"Think Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* crossed with Kirsten Johnson's *Cameraperson*. It's a magic spell of a film: a remarkable example of how filmmaking and montage can capture the essential essence of a life." **JOHN NUGENT**

THE FAST SHOW

STEPHEN KING'S STORY THE RUNNING MAN IS ABOUT A GUY RISKING HIS LIFE ON LIVE TV. AND, AS THE ALWAYS KINETIC EDGAR WRIGHT AND HIS QUICK-WITTED CAST TELL US, THEIR NEW SPIN ON IT HAS NO INTENTION OF STANDING STILL

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

You've heard of Elf On The Shelf. You've heard of (but hopefully not participated in) Boar On The Floor. And you may have tried, but failed, to forget about *The Cat In The Hat*. But they all pale in comparison next to Powell In A Towel.

It's 19th December 2024. Six days 'til Christmas, not that you'd necessarily be able to tell by stepping onto the set of Edgar Wright's new movie, *The Running Man*. There isn't a tree in sight, and the only lights of note can be found on the mammoth multi-storey set that takes up most of a Leavesden soundstage. That set represents the YVA, a YMCA-style hostel where the film's hero, Glen Powell's Ben Richards, has taken temporary refuge. It's a hugely impressive build, courtesy of Wright's long-time production designer Marcus Rowland, complete with several rooms, long corridors (all the better for chasing you down), and an elevator that, a handwritten sign informs us, is "borken".

It's also grotty and grimy and graffitied to within an inch of its life. "PUPPET MASTER EXECS" reads one slogan. "THE NETWORK IS A MANUFACTURED ILLUSION", goes another. One more for luck: "WE ARE FIGHTING THEIR BATTLES FOR THEM".

Right now, Richards is gearing up for a battle of his own. A contestant on the gameshow *The Running Man*, he is effectively on the run, trying to stay one step ahead of the show's notorious and deadly Hunters, whose job it is to track down players and retire them. Permanently. Only now, the net might well be closing in. At a most inopportune time, because Richards was just about to head to the shower.

Hence, Powell In A Towel. Move over, Dr. Seuss. "That's funny, man," laughs Powell. "We gotta make that a meme." Richards, who has discovered that it pays to be paranoid, has locked himself away in a bathroom, and is looking around, desperately, for a way out. There is none. "Fuck!" exclaims Powell. He starts looking for something that might give him a momentary advantage against his pursuers. He grabs the towel rail, rips it out of the wall, and prepares to smash the mirror with it. At this moment, Powell is many things: frantic, panicked, a hot mess. He is also not running. At least, not yet.

Of course, this isn't *The Running Man*'s first race. The starting pistol (if we're going to continue this analogy) went off in 1982, in the shape of a novel by an American author named Richard Bachman. Who turned out to be the pen name for none other than Stephen King. In the '80s, much as now, Hollywood was going crazy for all things King, and so *The Running Man* was earmarked for the big screen.

Main: Head Hunter: Evan McCone (Lee Pace). **Right:** Director Edgar Wright with Glen Powell (who plays Ben Richards) on set. **Above:** Show down: A restricted Richards (Powell) with 'The Running Man' host Bobby Thompson (Colman Domingo).

Initially, it was going to star Christopher Reeve as Ben Richards, with Andrew Davis (who would later direct *The Fugitive*, another film about a running man) behind the camera. The end result, though, was very different, with Arnold Schwarzenegger playing Richards and Paul Michael Glaser — yes, Starsky from *Starsky & Hutch* — calling the shots.

It's a solid slice of '80s Arnie, lying somewhere between *Predator* and *Raw Deal* in the quality stakes. And it was a pivotal moment in the moviegoing life of a young Somerset teenager named Edgar Wright. "It was probably the first time that I was aware that a book and a film were different," he tells *Empire*. "I'd read the book and I saw the Schwarzenegger film, and I was like, 'Oh, this is *completely* different to that book.'"

It was. The basic premise is the same — a man becomes a contestant on the world's deadliest gameshow — but the execution is wildly different. The film pitted Arnie against larger-than-life villains in a subterranean gladiatorial arena, carving out room for all kinds of cheesy one-liners as he dispatched them one by one. "It really didn't have a lot to do with the source material," says Josh Brolin, who plays Dan Killian, the Machiavellian producer of the game (in the previous movie, he was played by actual gameshow host Richard Dawson). "They turned it into an Arnold thing."

The King/Bachman book finds the author at his nastiest. It's a relentlessly grim tale in which the working classes have been subjugated by totalitarian overlords, who control information via their broadcast arm, the Network. Richards, desperate to earn some money to pay for his young daughter's medication, is recruited by Killian as a contestant on *The Running Man*, the most popular show on Free-Vee, and as he stays alive with each passing day, finds himself becoming an unwitting folk hero. It's a tale that is alarmingly prescient about a great many things, including the rise of mega corporations and reality TV. And it's hugely influential — without *The Running Man*, would we have *The Hunger Games*?

It's a cracking thriller, as an ordinary man tries to beat overwhelming odds. Which is why Wright filed the premise away for future reference. "Around the time of *Hot Fuzz* or *Scott Pilgrim*, I'd enquired about the rights, but it was all tied up," he says this July, as he sips a double espresso in the film's tucked-away London edit-suite.

With the rights all wrong, he focused his filmmaking energies elsewhere, making the likes of *The World's End*, *Baby Driver*, and *Last Night In Soho*. And then four years ago, out of the blue, he got an email from the prolific writer/producer, Simon Kinberg. It said, simply: "Are you interested in remaking *The Running Man*?"

Wright is keen to point out that while he was interested in remaking *The Running Man*, in the end his *The Running Man* is not a remake. "I felt that nobody needs, or wants, a straight remake of the 1987 film," he says. "But the source material had not been wholly adapted."

Instead, Wright sees this movie as a straight adaptation of the King story, all mounted with the approval of King himself. "I know it meant a lot to Edgar to get the blessing of Stephen King," says Brolin. Something that Wright readily admits. "When Stephen King read the script, he was really complimentary," he beams. "It's one of the best emails MB [Michael Bacall, the film's co-writer] and I ever got."

Several things about the King novel appealed to Wright. It would offer him the chance to world-build on a scale he hadn't attempted before, crafting an alternate future (King set his story in, of all years, 2025; Wright doesn't specify the year in his movie) inspired by an alternate past. "It's a slightly analogue world," he says. "It's cassette futurism, taking a cue from cassette tapes of the '80s. Tactile stuff never goes out of fashion. We took that ball and ran with that." Fans of flying cars, though, should prepare to be disappointed. "We went away from that," he explains. "It's been done so well in other movies. It's ›

difficult not to do spinners from *Blade Runner*."

The Schwarzenegger movie was contained, closed-in, captured on a series of soundstages. The novel had Richards out in the open, constantly surviving by the skin of his teeth in a world where it's not just the Hunters who can take him out. Anyone can take a shot at him. "This feels so vast," says Katy O'Brian, who plays Laughlin, one of Richards' fellow Runners. "Something about being a target in the open is horrific. I love seeing that difference in dynamic."

Wright was also drawn to the satirical edge of the story, razor-sharp in the King novel, dulled somewhat in the Arnold movie. *The Running Man* is a commentary on so many aspects of modern America, notably the unstoppable rise of reality TV, and the resulting erosion of standards. "I hate the system," says Josh Brolin. "I think the system is severely broken. So if this face expresses the evil of the system, so be it."

The Running Man, you feel, is pretty much what would happen if TV executives weren't bound by little things like the law. Imagine a version of *The Traitors* where they actually murdered each other, or an episode of *The Chase* ending with the Beast literally chasing down the contestants. Colman Domingo, who plays *The Running Man*'s showboating host Bobby T, feels like Wright's movie is capturing the vibe of our times, and is a cautionary tale about the times that could yet be. "I don't think we have to look too far away from being in a dystopian society," he says. "That's why there's such a great need for a film like this. It's going to be entertaining, but it makes you think about the kind of world we want to live in, and where we need to possibly press 'pause', to save our souls." (For the record, there will be other gameshows glimpsed within the movie. Look out for *Speed The Wheel*, complete with giant hamster mascot, and Sean Hayes playing its host.)

Around the time Kinberg's email dropped into Wright's inbox, *Last Night In Soho*, one of the director's most personal films and a bold creative swing, had been and gone. It hadn't fared well at the box office, but today, Wright is philosophical about the experience. "There's stuff in that movie that I think is some of the best things I've directed," he says. But, keen to move on, he started developing a number of pictures simultaneously, including *Baby Driver 2* and *The Running Man*. The one that leapt to the front of the queue was *The Chain*, an adaptation of Adrian McKinty's bestselling thriller novel. It was all ready to go, until it fell apart at the 11th hour (one of the links in the chain, presumably, was borken) a couple of years ago.

That's when he got a call from Paramount, asking a question as direct and to the point as Kinberg's: "Why don't we do *The Running Man* this year?" Wright briefly pondered the question, and then responded: why not, indeed? So, he flew to LA and finished up the screenplay with Bacall. *The Running Man* was a go. Now all he needed was to find his Ben Richards. Luckily, he had a frontrunner in mind. ›

Clockwise from main: Thompson presents his contestants; In honour of original Running Man Arnold Schwarzenegger, prize money featuring his fizzog; Deadly gameshow producer Dan Killian (Josh Brolin); Running Woman: fellow contestant Laughlin (Katy O'Brian).

THE RUNNING GLEN

WHY THE HURRY, MR POWELL?

THE EXPENDABLES 3 (2014)

This brawnbuster gave us a great many things: Sly Stallone shooting Mel Gibson; Sly Stallone fully teaming up with Arnold Schwarzenegger; Sly Stallone growling, "I am The Hague!" It also gave us a pre-stardom, buzzcut-rocking Powell pegging it as Harrison Ford's helicopter circles overhead.

TOP GUN: MAVERICK (2022)

Aerodynamic. Agile. Powerful. A real speed demon. No, we're not talking about the F/A-18E Super Hornets flown throughout Joseph Kosinski's high-octane *Top Gun* legacyquel. We are, of course, referring to Hangman's formidable running-form on the sand during Maverick's sun-kissed beach-football sequence. Pure cinema.

ANYONE BUT YOU (2023)

Despite his action-movie chops, our man's best on-screen sprinting to date actually comes at the climax of this 2023 romcom (pictured above). Here, fully tuxed-up, he hops *off* a helicopter, bombs it down a pier, and practically glides up Sydney Opera House's 300 steps to declare his undying adoration for Sydney Sweeney. That's the Powell of love for you, folks.

TWISTERS (2024)

Tornado-wrangler Tyler Owens may not run *like* the wind in Lee Isaac Chung's blustery disaster movie, but he does run at it — and from it — with real, er, gust-o nonetheless. *The Running Man*'s Hunters will surely be a doddle for a guy who can outpace a mile-wide EF5.

JORDAN KING

When Glen Powell moved from Texas to Los Angeles in 2008, with dreams of becoming a movie star filling his head, he made a list of the directors he'd like to work with one day. "I'm getting to tick a few of them off," he smiles. And he is. Steven Spielberg (producer of *Twisters*) was on that list. Ron Howard (who's about to direct Powell in a firefighter drama) was on that list. And so was Edgar Wright. "I've been a fan of his since *Shaun Of The Dead*," says Powell. "He's one of the most extraordinary, inventive filmmakers out there. It was a very big 'pinch me' moment when we became friends.'"

That friendship had begun before *The Running Man* got off the starting block. Wright had seen and admired Powell's weapons-grade charisma in *Top Gun: Maverick*, where he effectively flies off with the movie tucked under his wing, and the two arranged to meet up in London, grabbing a coffee and watching *Get Carter* at the BFI Southbank. "It was almost like having a first date," laughs Wright. "We walked up onto Waterloo Bridge and got a cab. It was such a Richard Curtis moment."

In October 2023, about a year after what Powell calls their "first hang", Wright went to see *Hit Man* — the Richard Linklater film that Powell co-wrote as well as starred in — at the London Film Festival. Due to the actors' strike, Powell was absent, but sent Wright a text: "Consider this my showreel." "I don't even think he knew I was doing *The Running Man*," says Wright. "But in a weird way, that's what it was like. So when his name came up, I said he'd be perfect."

Powell isn't an Arnie type (who is these days?). And his Richards is "an everyman", according to Wright. The sort of guy whose heavy lifting is purely of the emotional kind. Still, the duo FaceTimed Schwarzenegger a week before filming began, eager to receive his blessing. Duly received, with Schwarzenegger settled into a lawn-chair, they then repaid the compliment by studding homages through the movie. "I do get to say, 'I'll be back!'" laughs Powell. "It's not said with an Austrian accent, I'll tell you that much. Arnold has his way of saying, 'I'll be back,' and I have mine."

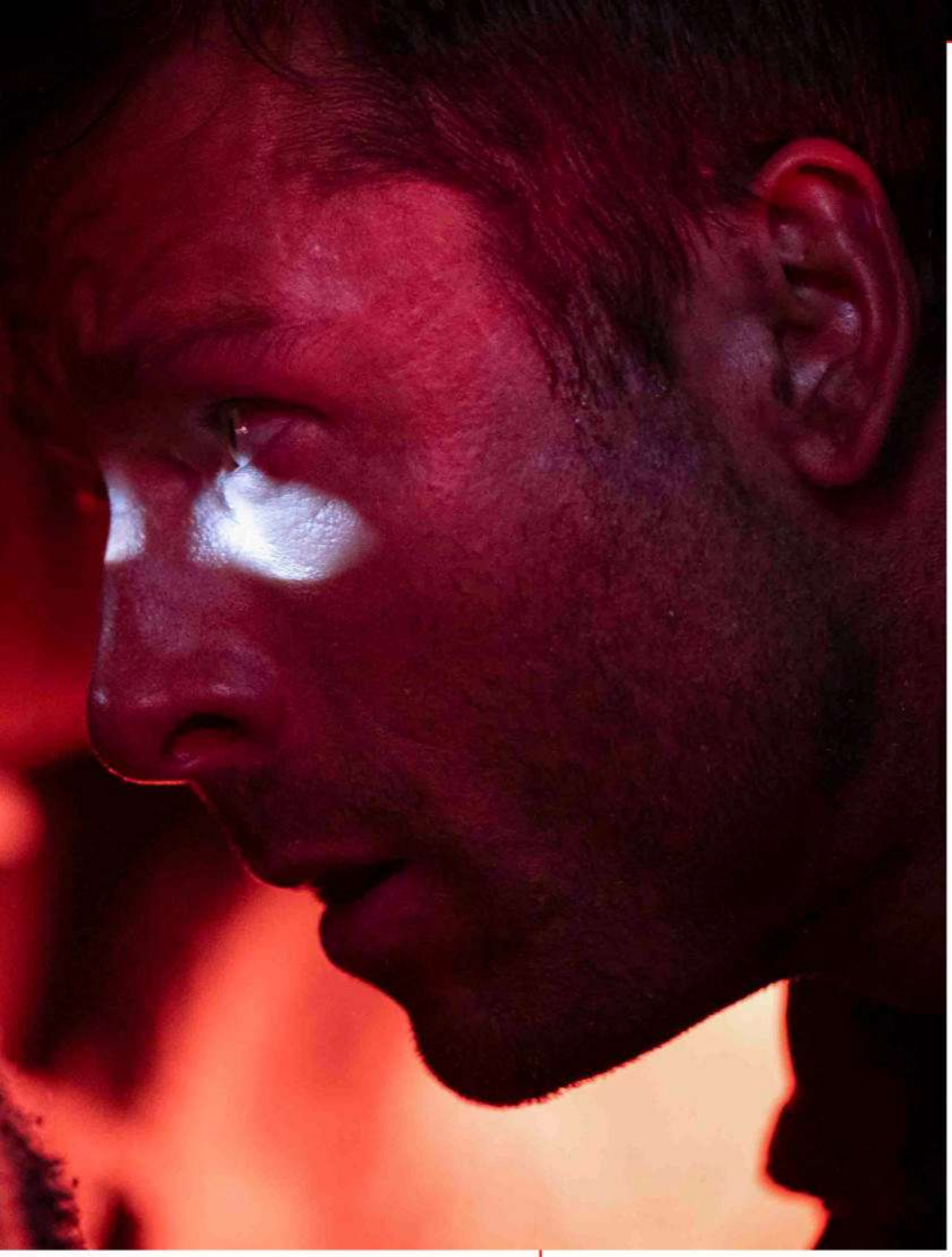
The King book doesn't leave Richards for a second, which really helps to up the paranoid ante. That's something Wright continues in his film. "You're with Glen in every single scene in the movie," he says. "That's something I really liked about the book: it was a very intense, subjective experience." Powell's constant presence in the film not only gave the actor a formidable workload, but meant that he constantly swapped out scene partners as the likes of Brolin, Domingo and Michael Cera flew in, shot their scenes, and flew out again. "I never felt alone," says Powell. "I felt like I was getting a new friend every couple of weeks. It always felt like a new chapter of the story."

One constant was Lee Pace as the chief Hunter, the mysterious masked-man McCone, who got a front-row seat to watch Powell go through the wringer. "I really badgered Glen on this shoot," laughs Pace. "He 1,000 per cent put it out there. McCone is playing it cool; Ben Richards is thinking on his toes."

And there's a lot of wringer for Powell to go through. While Richards isn't a one-man army

> "EDGAR IS ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY, INVENTIVE FILMMAKERS OUT THERE."
> GLEN POWELL

Clockwise from main: The heat is on: Richards takes a pause; Hunters are hunting; Brolin and Wright on set; Rebel and Richards ally Elton (Michael Cera).



(or, indeed, a one-man Arnie), he's still constantly fighting for his life. And that means a lot more than simply running.

Back in March 2025, when *Empire* visits the set of *The Running Man* for the second time, the running man still isn't running. We're okay with that, though. Because today, Glen Powell is jumping off a bridge.

It's a long shoot, which began in Glasgow, and has decamped from Leavesden to Bulgaria for its final week, and this is Powell's penultimate day. He's going out with a bang. About an hour outside Sofia, the country's capital, a steel bridge connects the banks of the River Struma. It's from this bridge that Powell will leap, the culmination of an action sequence in which Richards narrowly escapes from a Hunter. (In the finished film, he'll be leaping away from an explosion, which took place — with Powell wisely at minimum safe distance — earlier in the day, to much applause from the assembled crew.)

It's roughly a 30-foot drop into the Struma's rocky riverbed, but thanks to a harness that arrests his fall, Powell doesn't hit the water once during the several attempts it takes to get the stunt in the can. As he leaps off the bridge, a camera whips past him on a zipline (other artfully placed cameras, including a drone, take care of the other angles). Sometimes the timing is off. Occasionally, Powell's head or body aren't in the correct position for the camera to see. But eventually he nails it to his and Wright's satisfaction. More applause. "It was a real endeavour to actually create that on location, and to not do a CGI thing or a green-screen version of it," says Wright this June. "You can say, on the record, that you saw Glen Powell jump off a bridge!"

We can. And whether it's this sequence, or the chase in the YVA (featuring, lest we forget, Powell In A Towel), or an extended assault on a homestead that threatens to make *Home Alone* look like *Home Alone 3*, or a desperate battle on a plane, *The Running Man* promises to be the most action-packed movie Wright has yet done, as restless and relentless as its title character. "We're hanging on the side of buildings," laughs Powell, ticking off a list. "We're jumping off of moving cars and trains. An elevator plummets while I'm inside of it. There's an amazing airplane fight sequence that is just incredible."

And when he says "we", he often means "me". Powell has graduated from the Tom Cruise School Of Moviemaking, and that means that he does a lot of his own stunts. And even though he turned to Cruise for advice on how to handle action scenes ("He did tell me, 'When you get hit on screen, you are getting hit'") and how to run on screen ("'Film yourself running on camera as soon as possible. You don't look as cool as you think you do'"), the reality has been bruising. When he sits down with *Empire* between takes in Bulgaria, Powell is covered in blood. Some of it is Richards', some of it is another character's, but it's not hard to imagine some of it being his own. "It's been a lot of learning how to heal on the go while you're shooting," he says. "We've definitely taken some hits on this one." Sounds like the movie should be renamed. "Yeah, it's 'The Bleeding Man', dude!"

At that moment, The Bleeding Man is tapped on the shoulder. It's time to climb up onto a bridge and become The Jumping Man. As Powell leaves, we realise that we're not going to get to see him run. So how do we know that *The Running Man* has got what it takes when it comes to pounding the pavement? "There are some sick shots in this movie," he says. "I talked to Edgar about this. I was like, 'I need people to know that it's me sprinting.' So he designed an amazing shot in the movie where I can fully unleash. I didn't want people to be like, 'He was good at everything except for running!'" And with that Powell smiles, and heads back to set. Walking, not running. Saving it for when it counts.

***THE RUNNING MAN* IS IN CINEMAS IN NOVEMBER**

REEL

HARD INGS

IN ***THE SMASHING MACHINE***, DWAYNE JOHNSON PLAYS A UFC PIONEER WHOSE BIGGEST FIGHTS WERE OFTEN INTERNAL. AS DIRECTOR **BENNY SAFDIE** TELLS US, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL BATTLEGROUND…

WORDS **HAYLEY CAMPBELL**

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO LOSE? BENNY Safdie wants to show you. "There's this book I read a while ago called *Losers* — it's a collection of essays on different people in different sports and how they've dealt with loss," he says over Zoom, adjusting the angle of his screen so it doesn't look like the entire sun is emanating from one eyeball. The essay that really got to him was Gay Talese's 1964 *Esquire* profile of world heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, written right after Patterson had lost his title to Sonny Liston. Safdie can't remember it exactly, but he paraphrases: "Patterson says, 'When I got knocked out, I felt like the whole stadium was giving me a kiss. But then right after that, I was hoping there was a trapdoor in the middle of the ring that took me from the ring to my locker room because the walk back to your locker room is the most upsetting — *you have to face everybody*.' I was like, 'Okay, I need to show *that*. I was obsessed with [the idea of], 'What does this *feel* like to a fighter?'"

In *The Smashing Machine,* Safdie's biopic of early UFC star-fighter Mark Kerr, played by Dwayne Johnson, there is an almost uninterrupted shot from the floor of the ring to the locker room. We see every fan, security guard, trainer, cleaner, every waiting fighter with their cauliflower ears — every person that Kerr has to face on his way down, having just lost his undefeated status. But we've also been with him before that: through his training, his near-fatal addiction to painkillers, his complicated relationship with his girlfriend, Dawn (Emily Blunt). When he gets into that ring, we know the weight he is carrying, so we feel the heaviness of the fall. "I was really obsessed with radical empathy," continues Safdie. "I wanted to make a really honest movie about what it means to compete and to feel that. [The audience] just see you as this big guy, strong guy — they don't know that you're struggling with anything else. It can be very lonely."

Left, top to bottom: 2009's *Daddy Longlegs*, the Safdie brothers' first feature; Making *Uncut Gems* (2014) with Adam Sandler; Benny Safdie in *Good Time* (2017).

In the late '90s, UFC was not yet a worldwide phenomenon. The tournament, which pits fighters of all traditions against each other, was highly controversial, and thanks to several US politicians attempting to get it banned, major cities refused to host it (Safdie, a New York City native, went to a live show in 2002 as a teenager and had to travel to Connecticut to see it). Very little made it to TV broadcast. In Japan, where some of *The Smashing Machine* takes place, it was already a thriving industry that filled stadiums, though it was still in its infancy. Rules were literally being rewritten as they went — certain moves made illegal, others waved through — all announced at press conferences, and acted out in front of the spokesperson and her translator. But while the beginnings of UFC are the backdrop of this story, Safdie has tilted his spotlight to the corner, to the tender moments when a trainer is trying to bring his fighter back from unconsciousness, asking him if he knows who he is, where he is. If he knows that he just lost. "It's really kind of a beautiful thing," says Safdie. "But I realised you never see that. Because you're always paying attention to the guy with his hand in the air."

The Safdie brothers, Josh and Benny, had a plan until they didn't. The goal was *Uncut Gems*: it was always going to be their next movie. The rest happened while they waited for that chance. Their first feature together was the semi-autobiographical *Daddy Longlegs* (2009), about a divorced dad and his two sons, a film Benny was so convinced was going to be the thing that made their names that he spent eight hours a day, for several days, wearing a sandwich board

outside the IFC Center cinema in Manhattan, trying to convince people to see it. When it didn't bring the level of success that would have allowed them to make *Gems,* they made *Lenny Cooke* (2013), a documentary about a high-school basketball prodigy, and *Heaven Knows What* (2014), an uncompromising drama about a homeless heroin addict.

Robert Pattinson saw a promotional still for *Heaven Knows What* and — working with heavier material while breaking out of his *Twilight* heartthrob era — emailed the Safdies saying he wanted to work with them. He joined them for *Good Time* (2017), starring as a small-time bank robber who tries to free his developmentally disabled brother (played by Benny) from police custody, while avoiding his own arrest for the heist that put him there. *Good Time* was edited in 1.5-hour bursts while Benny's son slept, the baby monitor propped up against his computer screen. If the film hadn't been successful, Benny had already surrendered to the idea that he might have to do something else to support his young family. But it garnered enough buzz to get the Safdies where they needed to be.

So, finally, came *Uncut Gems*, in 2019. It stars Adam Sandler as Howard Ratner, a jeweller with a gambling addiction and spiralling debts to loan sharks; a character introduced arse-first while sedated on a hospital bed, mid-colonoscopy. It's a film so stressful that some viewers have recommended it come with a heart-health warning like a pack of cigarettes, but ask your most stressed friend what they think and they'll tell you it's just funny. When we put this twist of perception to Benny, he laughs. "Yeah! For sure!" (He's in the "It's funny" camp.) *Empire* suggests that if the autobiographical element of *Daddy Longlegs* is accurate — set during two snowballingly chaotic weeks while a pair of young brothers are in the custody of their father — then maybe a certain level of chaos to the Safdies is like water to a fish. Perhaps they weren't just making stressful movies; this is how their world is.

Above, left to right: Dwayne Johnson as UFC fighter Mark Kerr in *The Smashing Machine*; Benny Safdie directing Emily Blunt and Johnson on set. **Below:** Safdie in front of the lens for *Licorice Pizza* (2021).

"There is an element of that, yes," he says. "It was a very chaotic childhood, and it settled down when my mum remarried. [But] there is an understanding of what a chaotic situation feels like, and how you're trying to navigate those moments. You really are just grasping ›

for whatever branch or rope that somebody gives you, and you might pull on it, and it's like one of those cartoons, there's nothing attached — " Safdie mimes a kind of Wile E. Coyote split-second, mid-air doom. "But you don't just ever give up and let yourself wash away, you know? You're constantly thinking, 'Oh, I can dig my way out of this hole! And maybe I'll get to the other side and come right back around!'" he laughs. "In [*The Smashing Machine]* there is a sense of pressure. It's different, but it's definitely there. Maybe I was exploring another side of that."

This is his first high-profile film without his brother (though he also made the disturbing, surreal TV series *The Curse* solo, with Nathan Fielder). In early 2024 it was confirmed that he and Josh were going to split their directing partnership, but neither has discussed it publicly in any depth. Benny now kind of shrugs about it and says that while he was making *The Smashing Machine* it didn't really enter his mind; it wasn't new territory. "We had started out making movies separately, in college," he says. "And then we were always working towards something, and when we reached that place it was almost like, 'Oh, well, what now?'" Post-*Uncut Gems,* they ran out of pre-planned track. They could do anything. Benny was also taking on more acting roles in films that were not made by him or his brother; working with directors like Paul Thomas Anderson (as a closeted politician in *Licorice Pizza*), Christopher Nolan (as a Hungarian-born physicist in *Oppenheimer*), and Claire Denis (as a CIA agent in *Stars At Noon*). He also played a wholesome dad in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and a Jedi in the TV series *Obi-Wan Kenobi*. "Then it was like, *'I'm interested in this,'* and, *'I'm interested in this,'* and then you want to figure that out," he says. "It just felt like a continuation of a process."

The Smashing Machine contains the DNA of every Safdie brothers film that came before it, which, *Empire* proposes, are all about fuck-ups who are trying really hard. "That seems about right," he says, grinning. "I think it's an important human emotion to study. I always loved seeing somebody try, *truly* try, to do something. Because when you see them trying, they're very vulnerable."

Dwayne Johnson had been trying to get this film made for years. He'd seen a 2002 HBO documentary, *The Smashing Machine: The Life And Times Of Extreme Fighter Mark Kerr*, and acquired the rights. In 2019, Johnson told Safdie to watch the documentary. "As soon as I saw it, I completely connected with Mark," says Safdie. "There was something about him. He's so soft spoken, so gentle, and the way he used words was really beautiful — it was such a contradiction to the stereotype."

Safdie, who boxed as a teenager and suffered concussions that made him temporarily lose words from his vocabulary, says that one of the neat twists of MMA's rewritten rules is that the head is not a legal target during fights. This means that MMA fighters can recall their mid-fight thoughts more clearly than a punch-drunk boxer might and, to Safdie, that's what this was all about. "That was the number one goal — to feel the feelings. And here's this guy who can tell me *exactly* what he's feeling. I could understand [his situation] because I've had stuff happen to me in my life that nobody knows about, that is really hard to deal with, and yet everybody's got to go out there and put on a face and be the person who they're expected to be, you know? I knew what that was like, and I knew that DJ knew what that was like. We both got the same thing."

Then the pandemic hit, and the project faded away. Safdie, like most of us, bought something on the internet that he thought might fix everything. "I found this sweater," he

Far left: Safdie as physicist Edward Teller in *Oppenheimer* (2023). **Left:** In satirical TV series *The Curse*, which Safdie also co-created with Nathan Fielder.

A24, Alamy, Netflix, Showtime, Universal

Far left: Takedown: Kerr in the ring in *The Smashing Machine*. **Above:** A night on the town with partner Dawn (Blunt). **Bottom:** Safdie in 2022 romantic thriller *Stars At Noon*.

says, almost bracing before telling the story. "It wasn't the exact Nautica sweater [that Kerr wore in the documentary, but] I wrote DJ a letter and said, 'Whenever you put this on, hopefully it will help you become Mark.'" Safdie never heard back. "I don't know if he got it! My handwriting is terrible. I looked like I was a psychopath. And so maybe somebody [on Johnson's team] got this sweater with this weird letter that was really effusive, and they're like, 'We should just...'" he grimaces, "'...hold on to this.'"

Time passed, and Safdie was cast in *Oppenheimer* as Edward Teller, known as 'the father of the hydrogen bomb' (coincidentally, one of Safdie's back-up plans if *Good Time* didn't work out was to return to what he'd studied at Boston University, physics, and become an actual physicist). On the set, he showed Emily Blunt — a close friend of Johnson's — a screenshot of Kerr in the documentary. "I said, 'I always think about this. I haven't stopped. I know it's just gonna be something really special.'" Blunt reconnected the two and this time Safdie was less oblique/weird. "I was just like, *'Let's do this.'* Because I've learned that you can't ignore those things that you can't stop thinking about. You just have to go for it."

There's a scene in *It's A Wonderful Life* that became a mission statement for what Johnson and Safdie wanted *The Smashing Machine* to be. It's the moment when George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) goes to pick up his brother at the train station, travel brochures in hand, believing this is the moment his brother is going to take over the old Building & Loan and finally set George free, only to learn that he has gained both a wife and a new job in Buffalo instead. "George has to go back to the crowd and not let them know that he knows. We see him go from extremely sad to happy in one take. And I was like, *'That's* the marker. That's it!' It just opened up the whole thing because if you look at that movie, at the end, everything is exactly the same. He's changed his perspective on life."

To pull it off would require a hell of a performance from Johnson, but Safdie knew it was possible. "I could sense that there was something he was not being given permission to do," he says. "I remember going in and saying, for a certain part, 'Imagine what it feels like to have nobody relying on you, no pressure to perform. You can just let it all go.' He'd never had that — there's always been that feeling that somebody was relying on him... I could ask him to do anything. That was what was so shocking — I could give him the most subtle things to try and hit, and he would just layer it in. Ooh!" Safdie rubs his arms like he's suddenly freezing. "I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it."

In both acting and directing, Safdie talks about feelings as experiences. He doesn't want to put something on screen if he doesn't know what it feels like. When directing the finale of *The Curse*, he got the stunt coordinator to belt him into a harness and hoist him into a tree so he knew what it felt like to be stuck there. For *The Smashing Machine* he got someone to knock him down so he knew what it felt like to be slammed to the ground. When preparing for the domestic fight scenes, Safdie, Blunt and Johnson spent hours in a room revealing the worst things they've ever said in an argument and how it made them feel, so that when it came to filming, they were already raw. All of them cried on set. When Safdie talks about preparing for any project, it sounds like evisceration.

"I had a therapist a while ago who said to me, 'The way they treat cancer is they take the blood out of the body, run it through this machine that blasts it with radiation, and then it goes back in your body — and that's what we're doing here. We're taking all of your thoughts and feelings and putting it out on the table. We're looking at it, seeing things, acknowledging things, and then we're putting it right back in.' I was like,'That's a pretty good description of what movies do: you look at everything, you notice things, and then it just gets put right back inside your head.'" Safdie wants his films to pick you up and shake you, then set you back down on the mat, changed. "When you make something like *that*, then you know, 'Alright, we're finished here.'" He sits back, job done.

***THE SMASHING MACHINE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 3**

NEIL MARSHALL'S CLAUSTROPHOBIC CREATURE-FEATURE **THE DESCENT** WAS DOUSED IN BLOOD AND TEARS. TWENTY YEARS ON, WE REUNITE HIM AND HIS CAST TO CELEBRATE THEIR UNCOMPROMISING TUNNEL-VISION

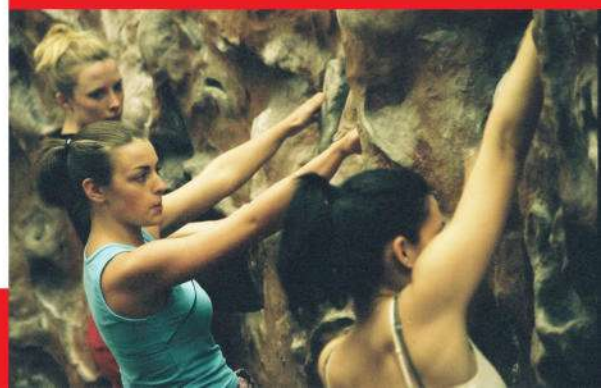
DEEP

WORDS
SOPHIE BUTCHER

Spelunking: not a hobby for everyone, and one with even less appeal for those who have seen Neil Marshall's 2005 subterranean scare-fest *The Descent*. It was only the writer-director's second feature film (following 2002's gritty werewolf horror-thriller *Dog Soldiers*) and an unexpected box-office hit, making over $57 million worldwide on a budget of just £3.5 million.

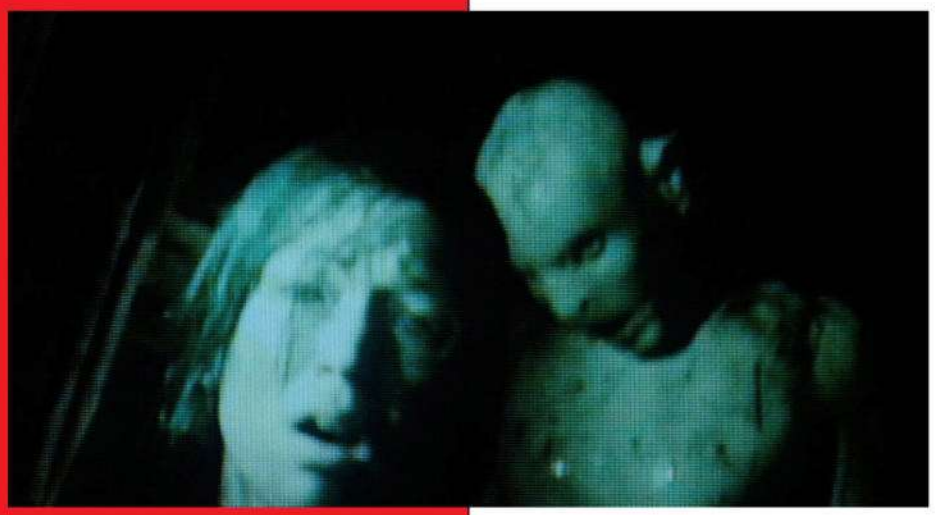
The film starts as horrifyingly as it means to go on, with a brutal car crash that kills the husband and young daughter of outdoor-sports-loving protagonist Sarah (Shauna Macdonald). A year later, she heads to the Appalachian mountains for a caving trip with friends. Still drowning in grief but putting on a brave face, she joins a gang of five other women — best friend Beth (Alex Reid), half-sisters Rebecca (Saskia Mulder) and Sam (MyAnna Buring), adrenaline junkie Holly (Nora-Jane Noone), and the confident expedition leader Juno (Natalie Mendoza). Things get unnerving when the women learn Juno has taken them down an as-yet unexplored cave system — but they get a hell of a lot worse when the group encounters the Crawlers, the blind, flesh-eating humanoid monsters that reside deep underground.

Two decades on, *The Descent* is regarded as one of the best horror movies of the century so far, thanks to its suffocating setting, terrifying creature design and the masterfully executed relationships between characters. As the film celebrates its 20th anniversary, *Empire* hops on a Zoom with Marshall and his cast (with the exception of Mendoza, who sadly couldn't make it) to talk creepy Crawlers, the challenging shoot, and making friends for life.



Neil, where did the initial idea come from?
Neil Marshall: After *Dog Soldiers*, I pitched a project about zombies on an oil rig (*now in development, called* Gunn), but was asked for something cheaper. On the train home, I came up with *The Descent*. The idea of six women in a cave was almost a counter to *Dog Soldiers*, because that was this very macho thing, soldiers in the woods. Also, one *Dog Soldiers* review said it was more funny than scary, and asked when a British filmmaker was going to make a truly scary horror film again. I took that as a challenge.

For the actors: what were your first impressions of the script? Did the all-female line-up stand out to you?
Shauna Macdonald: My preconceived idea was that 'girls go caving' meant it would be leaning into all this sort of lad-mags stuff. But as soon as Sarah's daughter gets the pole through her face, I thought, "Oh! This is really good." The writing, the plot, the twist — as you read it, you were totally hooked on it. That it was six females was an added bonus, but we were constantly asked about that. For us, we were just working on a film. It wasn't until after the film was done, and all the press, that I thought, "Oh yeah, this is actually pretty unique."
MyAnna Buring: I agree. At the time, yes, it was rare — but I had felt like there was something in the air that was going to change, and that this film was just part of that natural evolution. What I think has been weirder is that the industry hasn't changed to the extent that I naturally expected it would back then.
Macdonald: Natalie and I were once asked by a radio interviewer if all our periods got synced up during the shooting. And that was okay? To ask a female actor that? It was good that we were getting interest about it, but there was this sort of sexualised, grotesque element. Not from anything we were creating, but from outside.
Nora-Jane Noone: It became sensationalised. We were all aware at the time that it was amazing to have this group of women and these strong characters, but it didn't translate to that [reception].
Marshall: Which is bizarre, because we were at pains to desexualise the whole thing. Once I'd made the decision to make them all women, I never really gave it a second thought.
Saskia Mulder: I just remember reading the script and thinking that I really liked the characters. Something really bad happening to one of your girlfriends and you being there for each other was something I really responded to. My fear was it would be six girls in a cave in a bikini, but the audition made it clear it was never going to be that way.
Marshall: Again, that was a conscious thing. At one point during the development stage, someone suggested there needed to be a scene where they came upon a lake and they'd all strip off and go swimming together. I said, "If that's the film you want to make, I quit." That's the



Facing page, top to bottom: MyAnna Buring, Nora-Jane Noone, Shauna Macdonald, Alex Reid, Saskia Mulder and Natalie Mendoza pull no punches; Sarah (Macdonald) in the red; Shedding light on the horror; Hanging tough. **This page, above:** Beth (Reid) meets a Crawler. **Left:** Writer-director Neil Marshall.

kind of stuff we were dealing with. But thankfully, people backed our vision of it. That's what we got to make, and that's what's stood the test of time. It wasn't six Lara Crofts. It was the anti-Lara Croft, as Alex [as Beth] says so beautifully in the film. It's another thing I'm deeply proud of, that we were way ahead of the curve on doing something like that. Even now, it's still very rare, certainly in the horror genre, to get an all-female cast.

You shot all the cave scenes at Pinewood Studios, in meticulously designed sets. How immersive were they?

Mulder: They were all made of polystyrene, which would get flipped and changed in order to make different bits of the cave. When you held onto something it was very light. So visually, it was great, but the moment you were in it — especially because we had gone caving for real — it was not.

Buring: Everybody would be like, "Don't jump!"

Alex Reid: Because if you did, it would peel off and there'd be a bit of white polystyrene. And you'd be like, "Sorry!"

Marshall: We had to paint it every time a bit of white polystyrene appeared. From the outside, they looked a bit rickety. They had these wooden frames. They only became impressive once you got inside and turned the lights off. But just because we shot it in the studio does not mean it was nice and warm and comfortable. It was January, there was no heating, and [the actors] were constantly being showered by spritzers and hoses, which was all icy-cold water.

Mulder: It was minus 2 outside! Because of some security thing, they had these huge doors which had to be open all the time. That was bad for us — but the poor guys playing the Crawlers, all they were wearing was this little pouch.

Buring: They'd been up at, like, 3am getting their make-up done for hours, and then on set, they could barely have a robe on them because it would ruin all the make-up. So they're the real heroes.

Marshall: I do remember NJ [Noone] having to lie in the stream for a couple of days. At the end of every take, we had to get everybody out, wrap them in thermal blankets and sit them next to a heater to warm them up for the next one. It was really tough.

Noone: Yep, that was a happy few days before Christmas.

What was the most challenging element to deal with?

Buring: Temperature, for sure.

Mulder: And being wet, all the time.

Buring: All other elements of it were just so exciting and fun and loving, that every now and again I'd say to myself, "You must find this wonderful!" But I was so cold and wet, I'd be like, "I can't!"

Noone: The claustrophobia as well. The harnesses would get really uncomfortable, and there'd be days and days shoved in this tiny little space together. You're like, "I just want to stretch my limbs!"

Marshall: There was so much dirt and filth and blood, and they couldn't wash it off. Quite often a death scene would happen, which would invariably involve lots of blood, and the next day everybody would be stained pink.

Noone: They kept putting mud on me, and it would just keep soaking into my skin. They couldn't put enough fake mud on me. I was like, "Can I just put real mud on, please?"

Marshall: I think you all felt a certain amount of pride at walking into a bar of an evening, looking that stained.

Buring: 100 per cent. A badge of honour.

Mulder: The fake blood and the make-up was just so good. There's something about looking at your own body and seeing your guts come out that really helps you get into the scene.

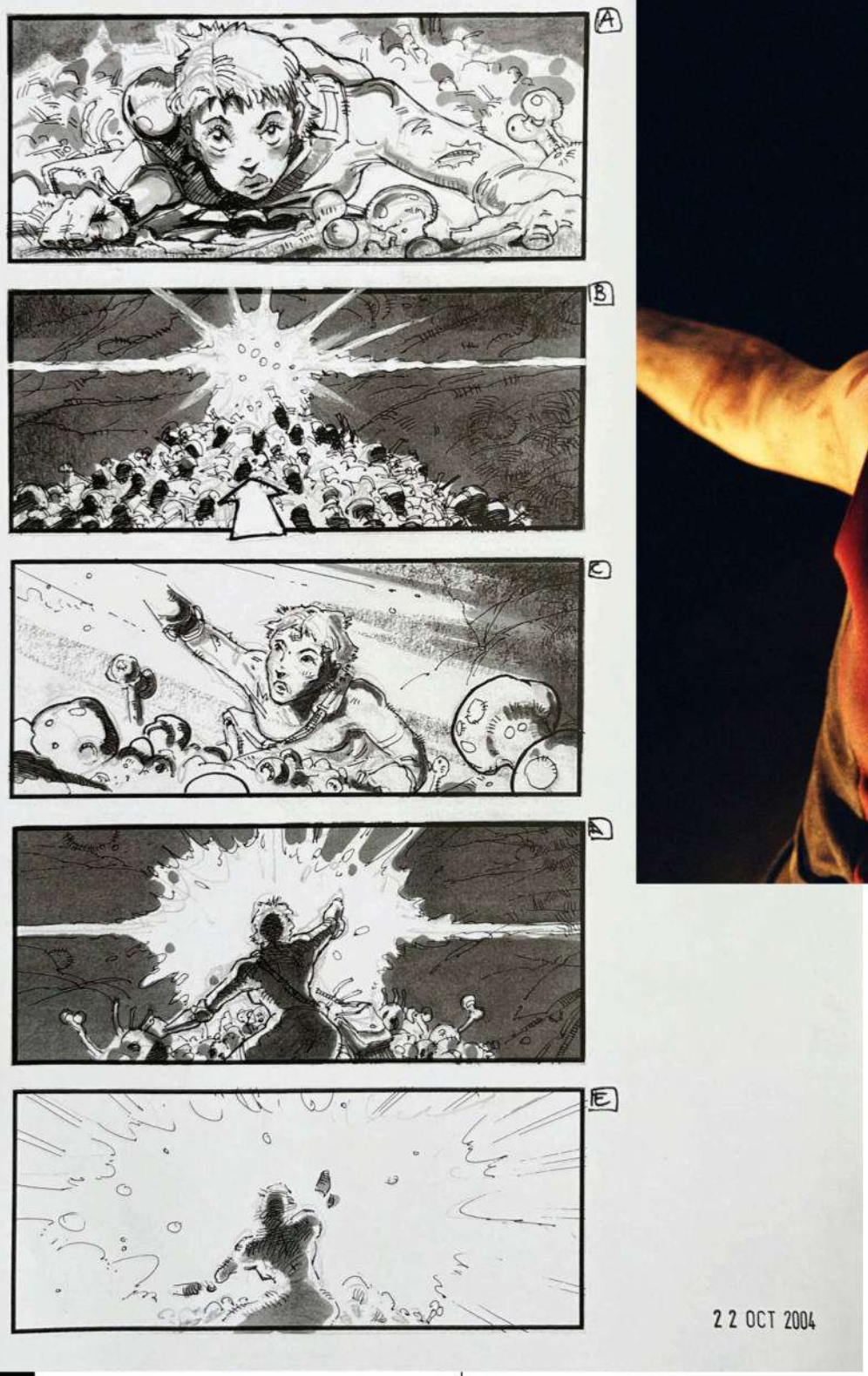
Marshall: Or having your head cut off.

Noone: Mine's in the attic somewhere. I'm not sure what to do with it.

Macdonald: We didn't realise how much our characters would get covered in everything. We shot the end of the film first, where Sarah gets out. At the time, I thought, "I look awful, I really look like I've been in the cave fighting for my life." But if you watch the film, I come out looking relatively clean, because it's nothing like what we [actually] ended up with, building up layers and layers of mud and blood and snot and tears.

Reid: You had three different types of blood. There was the set blood, that if you lay in it, that's what stained. Then there was the stuff you put on wounds, then there was the stuff you could put in your mouth, which was this awful mouthwash syrup.

Marshall: Every department had its own blood. ›



Neil, you kept the Crawlers hidden from the cast for most of the shoot. Did that ratchet up the tension on set?

Marshall: Maybe too much! When we finally had them meet, it was a scene in the pitch darkness, and we sneaked Craig Conway [who played lead Crawler, Scar] in for the shot, thinking we'd get a genuine reaction. Which we absolutely did, but it was *too* genuine. Everybody turned around, screamed and ran off the set.

Mulder: We'd been given one note, which was to react authentically but to stay within frame. But we all threw our hands in the air, and were running to the other side of the building. They were absolutely terrifying.

Marshall: Before that, I was sneaking them into other shots, and that was getting [the actors] even more suspicious.

Macdonald: That was the scariest thing. We did montage sequences where Neil was like, "Okay, guys, so just walk through this tunnel," and we were like, "Why? Why? What's there?!"

Buring: He was like, "Don't look to your right, keep looking to your left," and we were like (*high-pitched, scared voice*), "Okay!"

Macdonald: My memory is that even after we saw them, we didn't really mix with them?

Mulder: There were moments. They were so cold, we'd bring them cups of tea.

Far left: Storyboard artwork by Jack Cornish. **Centre, top to bottom:** Juno (Mendoza) takes on Crawler Scar (Craig Conway); Concept art of a Crawler; And Conway practising his moves; Sarah escapes… or does she? Depends which cut you watch. **Below:** Creepy Crawler.

Marshall: You only really met when you were in scenes together. But it's so sweet that you took the Crawlers cups of tea.

The film has two endings — the alternate one, implemented in the US after test screenings, sees Sarah get out of the cave, where the original cuts back to her still in there, seeing visions of her late daughter. How do you feel about those now?
Buring: The original is the only thing for me! I don't buy anything else!
Marshall: It was always argued that the alternative ending was the happy ending. To my mind, there's no happiness for Sarah outside that cave. Her family's dead, her friends are gone, she's completely insane. The best version of it to me was Sarah being, in her head anyway, back with her daughter. So that's the only ending there is, as far as I'm concerned.
Macdonald: I just think [the US one] was a cop-out. I really do. Because that ending was out there, it meant the sequel (*2009's* The Descent Part 2, *directed by Jon Harris*) could start with her just randomly running down a hillside. It's just so sad that Neil made a perfect film, had to screen it, and then listen to other's opinions.
Marshall: (*Laughs*) Oh, yeah. But that's the nature of the beast, isn't it?

It's clear you all still have a really strong connection with each other. How did you develop that while making the film?
Marshall: Alcohol.
Buring: Lots of alcohol. Buck's fizz, from NJ.
Noone: Buckfast!
Buring: Buckfast, that was it. Neil, you set up that week of bootcamp for us all. We went caving, rock-climbing, and we all hung out together. So by the time we walked on set, friendships had already been formed.
Macdonald: We were all so young. None of us had caring responsibilities or anything like that. That's the great thing about doing a film — you all go off on this adventure, and we were all committed to telling this story as best we can.
Marshall: It was a bunch of kids making a film.
Noone: It felt like that — for a lot of us it was one of our first films, and so it was extra special. We were having that experience together.

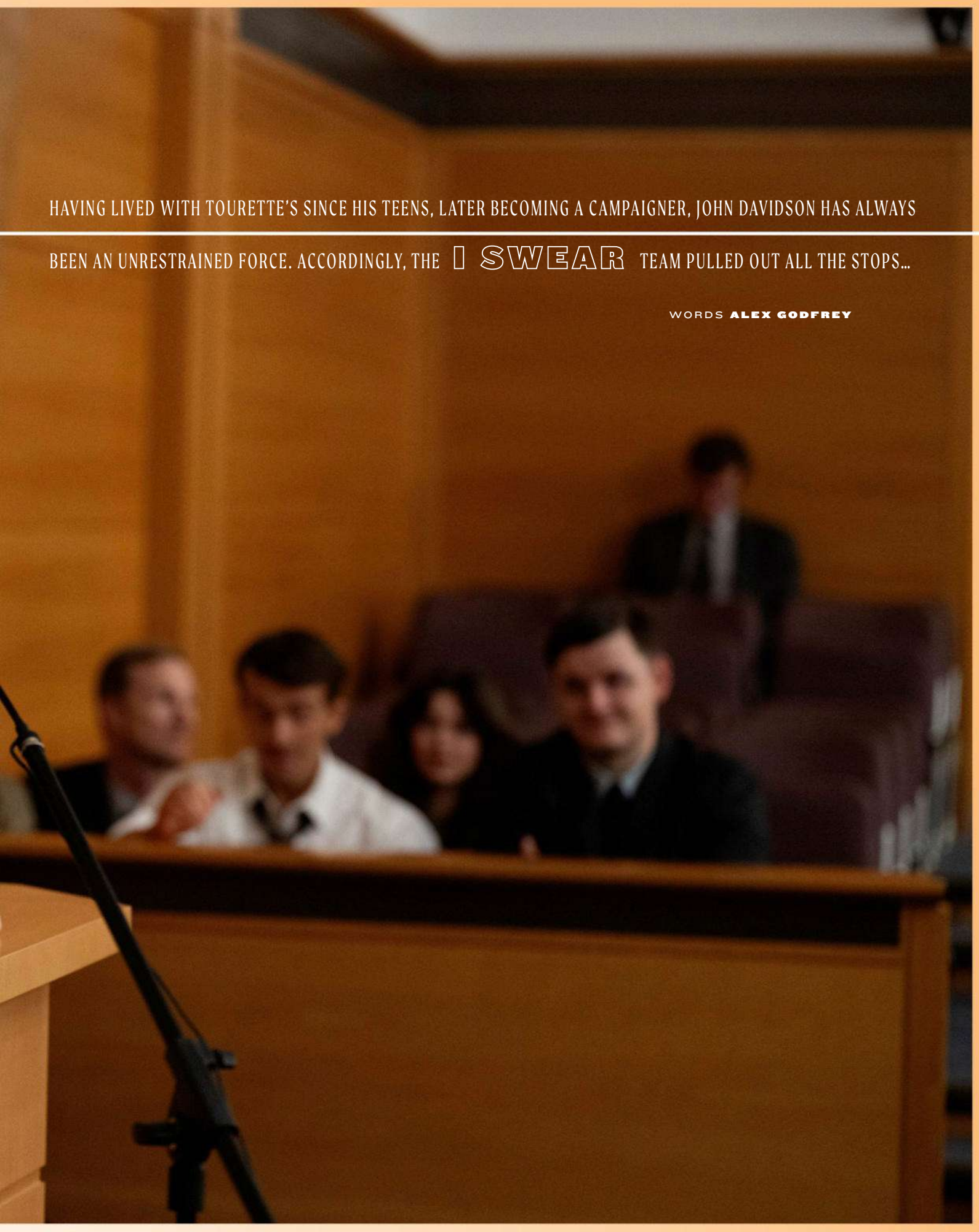
What do you think it is about this film that audiences are still finding and loving, 20 years later?
Marshall: It hasn't dated. We didn't fill it with contemporary needle-drops, and because it's not set in a city or anything like that, it doesn't really age. The other thing is that people are still claustrophobic. So it's always going to work.
Buring: I'd also say the friendships that were created, and that you managed to capture. That doesn't always translate, but it did here, and that's kind of magic.
Reid: There's never a wasted moment. You don't ever feel comfortable. Even when the girls first all get together, it's needly, and a bit fractured. There's more of that undertone than I ever realised, and it really adds to the story. You can never relax.
Marshall: I carry it with me wherever I go. I've got my *The Descent* tattoo (*several small black icons on his upper arm*). I'll take it to the grave. It's with me all the time.

Did you guys not all think of getting a commemorative tattoo?
Macdonald: I love the bones of everybody, and we've been together for such a long time. We have the film, but also we've had those 20 years after the film, and been through some big ups and downs of everybody's lives. I think that definitely warrants some ink, for sure.
Noone: Alright, when are we doing it?

THE 4K RESTORATION OF *THE DESCENT* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 24. JANINE PIPE AND NEIL MARSHALL'S BOOK *THE MAKING OF THE DESCENT* IS OUT NOW

Alamy, Holly Eve Watson, Neil Marshall. Storyboard: Jack Cornish. Material from The Descent © Pathe Productions Limited

FULL ON



HAVING LIVED WITH TOURETTE'S SINCE HIS TEENS, LATER BECOMING A CAMPAIGNER, JOHN DAVIDSON HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN UNRESTRAINED FORCE. ACCORDINGLY, THE I SWEAR TEAM PULLED OUT ALL THE STOPS...

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

IT WAS A COLD AND WET WEDNESDAY

on November 9, 2022, when Bristolian director Kirk Jones, who over the years has worked with Robert De Niro, Tom Hanks and Jennifer Lopez, turned up at John Davidson's door in Galashiels, an unassuming town in the Scottish borders. Jones had been in touch with Davidson, who has Tourette syndrome, for a few weeks, having first contacted him on Facebook, interested in making a film about him, and kept him posted as he travelled up to meet him for the first time. The then 50-year-old Davidson, he imagined, might be anxious — he is at the best of times — and now Jones was on his way, the big filmmaker coming to Davidson's small town. So, to put him at ease, Jones called him early that morning, and again after he'd landed at Edinburgh Airport and hired a car, telling him he was on his way. Off he set, through Galashiels' rolling hills, past the council flats, and finally here he was, knocking on his door. "Shall I take my shoes off?" asked Jones, as Davidson invited him in. "Let's have sex!" said Davidson.

Jones went for a comeback. "Should I take the shoes off first?" he said. Davidson put him right, though. "That was just a tic," he told him, but more importantly, he asked him not to respond to the tics, uncontrollable and meaningless as they were. "Just let it go over your head," he instructed Jones, who would learn a lot that day. Including that some tics were obviously tics, others not so much. And some were physical. "Behind him in the wall," remembers Jones, "were divots from his knuckles, because he sits there watching TV, and he'll just, *BANG*, and smash the wall." And not just the wall. "In that first meeting, he punched me in the balls a few times." Other times, Davidson would suddenly, and again, uncontrollably, reach out to hit him, stopping just short of contact.

Jones was getting a crash-course in the life of his potential subject. As they left the house for a walk with Davidson's Labrador, Suki, Davidson saw Jones' hire car, a bright pink Fiat 500. "Hairdresser's car!" he ticced. Some people took offence to his more insulting tics. Others didn't. A young couple approached, pushing their baby in a pram. "Child snatchers!" he shouted. The father, though, recognising Davidson and being aware of his Tourette's, shook his hand, wishing him well.

This was the beginning of a profound education for Jones, one that would change his life. The film would, in fact, change the lives of everybody who worked on it. Including John Davidson.

Davidson was ten when he first displayed signs of Tourette's. Not that his family — or most people — knew what that was in 1981. It began with continual blinking and restlessness, and after suffering a mental breakdown at 13, Davidson spent nine months in hospital, and was officially diagnosed. In 1989, when he was 17, BBC's *QED* made a documentary about him, *John's Not Mad*, introducing the world at large to a condition in which the person often physically tics and — in the case of Davidson — involuntarily spits and swears too. It was a portrait of a teased, lonely, misunderstood and often ostracised teenager. "Some of the time, when it feels bad, I feel like killing myself," he said on camera. "It just feels so bad."

Kirk Jones, who in 1989 was embarking on a career as a director in advertising, watched it, and never forgot it. He later saw subsequent documentaries which caught up with Davidson over the years, in 2002 and 2009. It was inevitable, he thought, that someone might eventually dramatise Davidson's life. "Because it was such an interesting subject," he says, meeting *Empire* in a Covent Garden restaurant. "This guy seemed to be a really considerate, sweet, caring young man, but could not control the racist, homophobic and sexist stuff that was coming out of his mouth, and was causing upset and anger with it. And I found it inspiring that he had such a difficult physical condition and managed to accept it, and then help other people." (Davidson eventually became a campaigner, and in 2019 the Queen awarded him an MBE for increasing awareness of the condition.)

Eventually, Jones began thinking about making such a film himself. In much of his work, he says, from 1998's *Waking Ned* onwards, he's mixed drama with comedy, to emotional effect, and Davidson's life was perfect for this. But he was apprehensive when Jones approached him; he'd had dispiriting experiences with media people in the past, including chat-show producers encouraging him to swear. Jones, though, meeting with him a few times around that period, was reassuring company. "I felt quite comfortable with Kirk," says Davidson, Zooming with *Empire*. "He wanted to know things that a lot of people in the past hadn't.

Clockwise from here: Caught by the fuzz: Robert Aramayo as John Davidson; The young John (Scott Ellis Watson); Peter Mullan as John's employer and friend Tommy Trotter; A fishing trip with Andy (Anthony Capaldi); Director Kirk Jones with Aramayo; Jones with Davidson himself.

Like how hard life is living with Tourette's. What I've had to endure. High points, low points. My ability to just keep getting up and going. That, after being through so much, I was still plodding away, and doing stuff for the Tourette's community. So it just felt good."

As Jones built a screenplay, Davidson, whom Jones had made an exec producer, would chip in. "He was there from day one, and we sort of built it up together," explains the director. "I wanted to make sure that officially we always had a responsibility to consult with him. And also I just wanted to make him feel a bit more reassured." Davidson's biggest note was that he didn't want such a heavy focus on the swearing, eager for the film to also highlight what are known as the comorbidities, including OCD and ADHD (only around ten per cent of people with Tourette's involuntarily swear). Jones took it on board. And began searching for who on earth could become John Davidson.

The younger version of Davidson, appearing in the opening 25 minutes of *I Swear*, is played by the then 14-year-old Scott Ellis Watson. He'd never acted before, studying *John's Not Mad* and sending in an audition on a whim after his older, more dramatically inclined brother had been asked to submit one. Jones was staggered by it. "His tape was phenomenal," he says. "It showed me that he was smart, instinctive, believable." ("That young lad has absolutely done me proud," smiles Davidson of his performance.)

For the adult Davidson, casting director Lauren Evans suggested Hull actor Robert Aramayo, who had played the young Ned Stark in *Game Of Thrones* and, by 2023, the half-Elven Elrond in *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*. But it was Netflix's 2021 psychological drama series *Behind Her Eyes* that Jones watched and liked, sending his *I Swear* screenplay to him. "It was scary," Aramayo says of reading it. "Because I knew that I wanted to do it. I mean, who wouldn't want to have a go at this? But I was frightened by it." And when they set to work, the fear continued. "In the initial stages, there were a number of times where I just felt like I couldn't do it," says Aramayo, calling the task "gargantuan. The endeavour of doing it was terrifying to me. But in the script, I really ›

felt John. Forget about the rest of it: it was John, that man, that grounded man who's loving and warm and open."

Aramayo felt that even more acutely after watching the old documentaries on Davidson and then meeting him with Jones, for Sunday lunch at a hotel in Galashiels. "I thought I would be frightened of John," he says. "I'd never met anybody with Tourette's before, so I didn't know what to expect. But I just really, really liked John." The feeling was mutual. "When I first meet people, I often can make quite a quick judgement about the kind of person they are, just through how they react to my tics," says Davidson. "And from the word 'go', Rob never flinched, never batted an eyelid, apart from when I ticced and hit him in the goolies. But he quickly learned that you don't stand on my right-hand side, because that's the side that my arm or leg tends to shoot out of."

Soon after that, Aramayo moved to Galashiels to live down the road from Davidson for two months, absorbing his behaviour and just hanging out with him, at home and at the community centre he works in. "I got on his nerves a little bit," laughs Aramayo. "I think he felt like he was in a petri dish at times." Not according to Davidson, who appreciated how deeply Aramayo was interested in him. "It was actually very eye-opening for me," says Davidson. "I learned a lot about myself, about things that I tend to not think about or talk about. How Tourette's affects me, how it makes me feel when I'm out in public. I felt open and free to talk about some of the stuff I've never spoken about before, giving Rob that deeper inner-understanding of what it's like to be me. So I found it very therapeutic. I would come away from being with Rob, and I felt really good."

As well as his time with Davidson, Aramayo read countless books on the subject, met many people with Tourette's, and spent time with Davidson's nearest and dearest, significantly Dottie and Chris, a couple who had taken him in when he was 17 to help and nurture him as he struggled with growing up. And Aramayo fed it all back to Jones, and into the ever-evolving screenplay. Most important for Aramayo was to play Davidson as a fully-rounded person. "That's what I wanted to bring to it. It's that guy. He's not just a tic machine." Just as significantly, though, when all the prep was done, Aramayo wanted to take ownership of his version of Davidson. To not impersonate him, but to become a version of him: "Who John was in me. The John that *I'd* built."

There was, initially, a plan for a third person to portray Davidson, too.

Early on, Jones wondered if Davidson could play himself, for the handful of scenes set in recent years. Davidson wanted to give it a go. Up in Galashiels, Jones took a cameraman and embarked on what he calls "a glorified casting" with Davidson, going through the film's opening scene, in which the Queen awards him his MBE, and a scene in the real community centre in which he works. "But I could tell it was a struggle for him," says Jones. "He was exhausted really quickly. And he got anxious." Jones struggled too, asking Davidson to tic in certain places. "It felt insulting, to say, 'Right, we need you to tic in this scene.'" Davidson would need to fake it.

"I found it really, really difficult," remembers Davidson. "I kept forgetting my lines, because reading a script about your life, and about how you behave, and then trying to act that out, I was like, 'I can't act this, because Tourette's is not an act.' Kirk would say, 'Can you throw a tic in here?' And I'm like, 'Kirk, that's not how it works, mate. If I tic, I tic.' He'd say, 'Can you add in a "fucking cunting bastard" or something like that?' And I'm like, 'I don't feel comfortable *doing* that.'" Let alone having to be on his mark, camera-wise, in the right place, at the right angle. "I thought, 'This is going to absolutely burn me out.' It got to the stage towards the end of the day, I said, 'Kirk, I'm so tired, I feel like crying.'"

Jones sent Davidson the footage, and told him that it had been a worthwhile process, but that he knew that Davidson didn't have the stamina for it. Davidson agreed. "I was extremely relieved," he says. Jones did, though, ensure that people with Tourette's would feature on screen, chiefly in a sequence in which Davidson arranges a gathering for members of the Tourette's community, and a standout scene in which he meets a young woman with the condition, precipitating a triggering tic-explosion for them both. Lucy is played by Andrea Bisset, who had never acted before, but had gone viral with a YouTube upload of herself during her driving test, tics interrupting the Highway Code formalities. In the scene, Aramayo instinctively responds to Bisset. Her tics were genuine; his weren't. But the effect is seamless. "I was blown away," says Davidson. "I got goose bumps all over my body just watching them. *Bam bam bam bam*, back and forward with the tics — that is *exactly* what it's like for two ticcers to come into contact with each other."

Aramayo committed to such authenticity from day one. Significantly regarding his portrayal of how absolutely knackering Tourette's is. It's exhausting even watching him. "I was floored, working with Rob, on every level," says Jones. "He absolutely threw himself in. He lived and breathed it."

"THE ENDEAVOUR OF DOING THIS WAS TERRIFYING TO ME."

ROBERT ARAMAYO

Here: John holds court. **Right, top to bottom:** John and his mum Heather (Shirley Henderson); Receiving his MBE from the late Queen.

One day, Jones invited Davidson to the set to watch some filming. That afternoon, sitting on the sofa in a trailer, Davidson heard something. A tic. But a very familiar one. "I thought, 'That is really spooky,'" he remembers. "'Why can I hear myself tic when I didn't tic?' And I peeked through the blind at the back of the window, and Rob was sitting on the step having a cigarette, playing a scene when I used to smoke. And the way he was holding a cigarette, the way he held it to his mouth to take a draw, it was spot on. And that's when I thought, 'You know what? This guy is fucking *amazing*.'"

Almost immediately after he watched the film last year, just before Christmas, Davidson had a heart attack.

Something seemed off from the start. Jones had hired out a cinema — *the* cinema — in Galashiels, the Pavilion — because, yes, he wanted Davidson to see the work in progress on the big screen, but also because, due to the Tourette's, he hadn't been to the cinema since he was 15. As everyone gathered outside, Dottie told Jones that, recovering from Covid, Davidson had a chest infection, but was intent on coming. "Walking towards the cinema, I had to stop about five times because I couldn't breathe properly," says Davidson who, when he arrived, sat in the front row, wheezing. "I felt absolutely awful. But I didn't want to let anyone down."

He has little memory of what he saw on the screen that day. As the film played, he interacted with the material, ticcing in response to things. As Jones recalls: "A character might appear on screen, like his school headmaster, and John would shout out, 'You lied to me.'" Jones was terrified of what he would make of it all. And when the lights came up, Davidson didn't say anything. Jones assumed he hated it. Dottie told Davidson they had to see the doctor at once, an appointment that had already been arranged due to his worsening chest infection. They drove to the doctor, who thought Davidson could have a blood clot in one of his lungs, immediately dispatching him to A&E. And soon after he and Dottie got out of the car, he collapsed.

"Everything just went black," he says. "And the next thing I knew, I was on the ground." He was wheeled into the hospital and treated for what doctors thought was double pneumonia, until they'd discovered he'd had a heart attack, rushing him to a hospital in Glasgow, where he was told that complications with the clot could be catastrophic. "They said that I had to understand that, you know, there might not be any way back from it," he says. "So it was quite a stressful time." Yet, as he always does, Davidson pulled through.

In June this year, Jones showed him the completed film on his laptop. "I could hardly see myself through the tears," says Davidson. "Every section of the movie brought back so much emotion, so much. At one point I felt like I couldn't breathe with anxiety. I was totally, totally blown away. It's sad, desperately sad. But then there's hope. I am so proud of the film and how it's come out." It means as much to everyone involved. "I feel an overwhelming responsibility, not to John, but his family," says Aramayo. "I just felt so privileged and honoured to be in charge of John's story."

A year on from filming, how would Aramayo say the experience has stayed with him? He pauses, unsure of how to articulate it. "Let's just say, this is the biggest challenge of my life, and also the biggest gift of my life," he says. "And I just feel really grateful to have had a go at it." His hope is that the film gives audiences a deeper understanding of Tourette's. "That it's not all doom and gloom. That it has complexity, and sometimes it sucks and sometimes it's awesome. Sometimes you can laugh at it, and sometimes it can really hurt you. Hopefully people will see some of that in it. That'd be great."

I SWEAR IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 10

AGAINST A BACKDROP OF DISASTER AND DEVASTATION, **THE LOST BUS** TELLS AN UNBELIEVABLE TRUE STORY. THOSE BEHIND IT DETAIL AN INTENSE FILMMAKING MISSION

WORDS **IAN FREER**

As wildfires started raging through her Californian community in the Pacific Palisades, Jamie Lee Curtis was on a plane to New York. It was January 7, 2025, and as she was en route to promote *The Last Showgirl* on *The Tonight Show With Jimmy Fallon*, she received a text from her husband (Christopher Guest) informing her he had been told to evacuate.

"At the time that I did the Fallon show, I did not know if our neighbourhood had survived it," she remembers. "The Pacific Palisades is where I shop. It's the community I got sober in. That's where I spend a lot of time. It had literally been incinerated by this fire." Fortunately, Curtis' home remained untouched, yet the tragedy reverberated around the actor-producer's professional life: for years, she had been making a film about such a disaster.

In 2022, reading The *Washington Post*, she came across an article about Lizzie Johnson's non-fiction book *Paradise: One Town's Struggle To Survive An American Wildfire,* the story of the 2018 Camp Fire (named for its origin near Camp Creek Road) that destroyed the northern California town of Paradise. Beginning on November 8, and finally contained on November 25, the blaze ultimately killed 85 people, injured 19 and levelled 1,800 homes. Tucked away at the bottom of a page, a box-out article spotlighted the story of school-bus driver Kevin McKay, who, along with two teachers, navigated the number 963, filled with 22 children, through the deadly inferno. This, Curtis realised, was a cinematic entry-point into a gripping and important story. As she recalls: "I literally cried out loud, 'THAT'S THE MOVIE!'"

Teaming up with producing partner Jason Blum (of Blumhouse fame), she moved quickly to snag the rights from the author's agents. "I called these people," she explains, "and I said, 'You don't know me. I'm an actress, I'm near death, and in this last chapter of my life, I'm starting to produce things.'" And the perfectly healthy and incredibly tenacious Curtis struck the deal in three days.

With a spec script then written by Brad Ingelsby (*Mare Of Easttown*), her passion project needed a director. Some might have gone a more obvious commercial route (Roland Emmerich's 'FIRE BUS!'), but Curtis had more refined ideas. Thinking about filmmakers with enough vision and compassion to realise *The Lost Bus* — as it was now called — the producer was noodling over a wish-list of two.

DURING ONE OF CURTIS' MANY LOCATION visits to Paradise, Kevin McKay asked her who was going to direct the film version of the defining event in his life. Here, she first revealed her top two picks, even before she'd discussed it with Blum: Ang Lee ("a master of these intricate, very American stories") and Paul Greengrass, the British director behind fictional thrillers shot through with realism (*The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*) and non-fiction dramas heightened by genre dynamism (*Bloody Sunday*, *Green Zone, United 93*, *Captain Phillips)*. Perhaps in the end, Curtis' shortest of shortlists was actually just one name.

"I always imagined that you could tell this enormous story through a smaller lens, being that it took place primarily on a bus," she says. "I thought that Paul Greengrass would be able to do both. He could give you the massiveness visually of this inferno, all the chaos, and also tell the story of the humans."

Greengrass hadn't directed a film since Tom Hanks Western *News Of The World* in 2020. He'd spent time developing an adaptation of Fletcher Knebel's political thriller *Night At Camp David*, about a President deemed crazy, but abandoned it when "the world became madder than the novel". He also started writing what will be his next film — *The Rage*, a drama set to star Andrew Garfield about the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 — but jumped on board *The Lost Bus* when the latter's financing temporarily collapsed.

Clockwise from main: Under fire: The 963 flees billowing smoke; Firefighter Ray Martinez (Yul Vazquez); School bus driver Kevin McKay (Matthew McConaughey) feels the heat; Director Paul Greengrass, centre, on set; Bus depot coordinator Ruby (Ashlie Atkinson).

"It felt like John Ford's *Stagecoach* or a submarine movie," he enthuses about the premise. "If you can get movie characters drawn against a backdrop of a real world with a ticking clock that feels urgent, you're in business. It's all about a forest fire and a bus driver and a teacher and a bunch of kids. And you go, 'Well, obviously, I'll do that.' It's perfect."

The Lost Bus couldn't be more in Greengrass' nerve-shredding wheelhouse. For those who love a game of Paul Greengrass Movie Trope Bingo (download the app), you can mark off: a) intense action inscribed by dynamic camera-work; b) examining a single event from multiple perspectives (beyond the bus, we follow the Cal Fire chiefs, the first responders, the Paradise Unified School District workers and the bureaucrats at the town hall); c) exploring hot-button topics ("Wildfires blazing out of control is in our consciousness in a way that it just wasn't ten years ago," says Greengrass); d) embedding a theme into the drama — riffing on climate change, every character here is wrestling with some idea of being too late; and e) real-life participants playing themselves to lay a deeper bedrock of reality (Bingo!).

While Greengrass' films live in the intersection between reality and the movies, he divides his MO into two distinct approaches. "Some films — I'm thinking maybe *Bloody Sunday* or *United 93* — I've been very, very purist about: 'This is exactly how it was.' I think there's an austerity to those two films in particular. And then there are others where you're trying to craft more of a movie with movie characters. *Captain Phillips* would be an example of that. I saw *The Lost Bus* more like that."

One feature that marks out Greengrass' movie-movie output is his use of Hollywood's biggest names (Matt Damon x 4, Tom Hanks x 2). With a population of under 5,000, Paradise — Aaron Sorkin couldn't come up with a more dripping-in-irony small-town name — is a hamlet full of down-to-earth charm, donkey derbies, beauty pageants and full-sized Stars and Stripes flags stretching as far as the eye can see. Finding an A-lister who could convincingly play a working-class school-bus driver was always going to be a headscratcher. But the answer was under the filmmaker's nose: Matthew McConaughey had been circling Greengrass' *The Rage*, so simply hopped from England 1381 to Northern California 2018, swapping a scythe for a steering wheel.

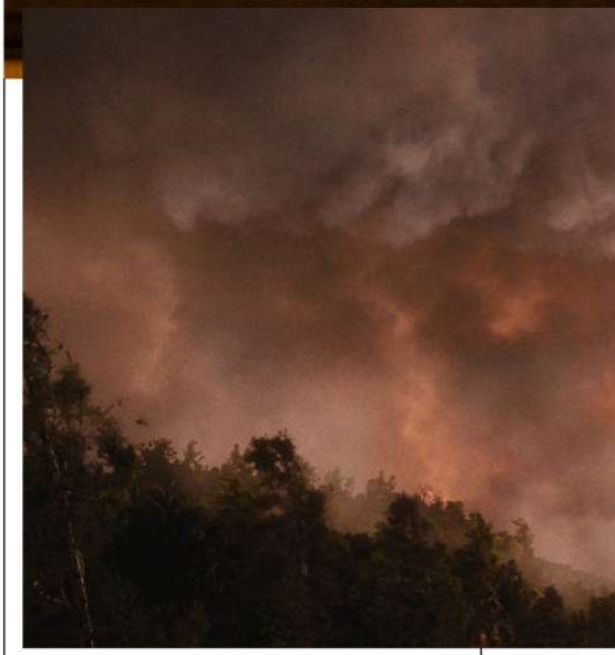
"He disappears into roles in a way that maybe other movie stars don't because their personas are more clearly defined," says Greengrass. "Paradise is a particular kind of blue-collar place and I think Matthew was the perfect person to embody that. He understands that world."

Curtis sees McConaughey's McKay as a classic Western hero — "stoic, brave, selfless" — but for the actor, his character is "just one of those guys that just can't seem to stick to something, be it financially, or [regarding] relationships, and is offered a chance at redemption — we've got to go into the gates of hell, the monster's mouth, the dragon's eyes, which looks like suicide".

The creation of this hell/monster/dragon (pick your own conflagration metaphor) offered *The Lost Bus'* biggest challenge. So Greengrass and co faced it head on.

THE DIRECTOR HAD A SIMPLE AMBITION when it came to *The Lost Bus*: "I wanted it to be the most realistic depiction of fire ever put on film," he says. "But the difficulty was, you don't want to make a film about a wildfire and cause a wildfire." Inspired by U2's residency at The Sphere in Las Vegas that involved huge wraparound digital screens to create realistic exterior environments ("It was absolutely unbelievable"), the filmmaker initially considered shooting the bus on a soundstage, but abandoned the idea in pre-production.

"It's one thing if you're a band rocking against a backdrop," he says, "but this is a bus moving through environments, with actors playing roles and kids having to perform. I just thought, 'If we don't have the real experience of travelling on the bus, it won't have the rawness you would expect in one of my films.'"



Instead, he and long-time producer Greg Goodman came up with an ingenious but demanding solution. To shoot the sequences of McKay, accompanied by teacher Mary Ludwig (America Ferrera), driving through the flames, the unit took over the closed-down Santa Fe University Of Art And Design, a location that provided circuits allowing 20 minutes of driving time around roads and streets that could safely be adorned with gas burners and lines of fire. Once the fire gets going, the smoke occludes the sun, causing what Greengrass calls "this strange eclipse light", forcing the unit to film tremendous amounts of the film at magic hour (think *Backdraft* if directed by Terrence Malick). The upshot saw Greengrass and company rehearsing the action throughout the day but with a window of only 45 to 60 minutes to roll cameras. This meant just three or four nightly attempts to capture the action, Greengrass often opting for looooong takes.

"I remember saying to Matthew and America, 'You're just going to have to trust me. The beauty of this is it'll make you feel like you've got the intensity of a once-only live performance, which will give an edge to what you're doing, but we'll have the safety net of a lot of preparation.' We basically had to shoot a day's work in an hour, but Matthew and America ran with it. There comes a moment in any film when you know your actors have got it, then all you've got to do is harvest their riches."

For Ferrera, *The Lost Bus* didn't just involve working in a new way: she found herself neck-deep in a genre she hadn't previously explored. "Once we were in the middle of making the movie, I realised, 'Oh, I'm making a horror movie,'" she says. "One of the brilliant things Paul did in that vein was this fire became like a ghost — so unpredictable, all-consuming, scary and fast."

Ramping up the fear factor, there are times in the movie when Kevin and Mary have to step off the bus, and McConaughey relished going *mano a mano* with (carefully controlled) flames. "As an actor I love it if I can deal with practical stuff," he says. "When I go to smother the fire and — BOOM! — it kicks back up, if I'm standing over it my face gets burnt. Your survival instincts come out. You don't have to make up in your mind, 'Oh, this is how I'm supposed to feel.'" Ferrera remembers things felt most real during pick-ups on a soundstage. "It was much more claustrophobic on the stage, the way that it probably would have been in that bus. All they would have seen was black smoke and red flames. It really helped you focus."

Beyond raging infernos, Greengrass had another big concern. "I really worried about whether Matthew would be able to drive the bus. They're difficult to drive." McConaughey saw the driving element as even more frightening than the fire. "There's a lot of bus-driving where I had to stop, start, take hard turns, miss a building

Clockwise from main: Teacher Mary Ludwig (America Ferrera) in the driving seat; A hug for then real-life Cal Fire Chief John Messina from producer Jamie Lee Curtis; McKay faces life-or-death decisions; Greengrass directs his younger cast members; Towering inferno; Filming the bus in situ.

by a foot. I was going places where I didn't know the fire was gonna pop up. Having the kids in the back and having to manoeuvre that bus, I had to be hyper, hyper, *hyper*-focused. That was a hell of a theme-park ride for me each night."

Two months after the film wrapped, Ruidoso, the town that doubled as a pre-fire Paradise, was itself hit by wildfire. "We had a very strange, sad, terrifying reality hit, where our colleagues who had worked with us to tell the story of another place that had this catastrophic event were having a catastrophic event themselves," says Curtis. McConaughey calls it "a pounding reminder this is a current topic and a consistent problem we need to fix." But what happened in Ruidoso was just prologue.

THE LOST BUS WAS DEEP IN POST-production this year when the January 7 California fires started to rage. "It was very disturbing to be mixing the film and then coming out and seeing the pictures of what was going on in Los Angeles," says Greengrass. "We had quite a few people on the crew lose their houses." Watching *The Lost Bus* footage while performing ADR was surreal, says Ferrera. Everyone on the film had some connection with someone who had been affected by the blazes. "I've got a friend who lost a house in a fire, rebuilt and lost another house this time round," says McConaughey. "It's happened to him and his family twice."

With Pacific Palisades cordoned off, Curtis didn't return to her neighbourhood until US news show *60 Minutes* took her back as part of a profile this May. The plan was to revisit the remains of the original *Freaky Friday* house that had been burnt to the ground. As they approached the affected area, in a car kitted out with GoPros, journalist Sharyn Alfonsi offered Curtis a Kleenex.

"I said to her, 'No, Sharyn, I'm not going to be an actress whose house didn't burn and start weeping on camera for you,'" she says. "We went through the checkpoint, and down into the Will Rogers beach area and I just started sobbing, making a wailing sound, because I had no concept of the degree of devastation. You could see the ocean from Sunset Boulevard — the density of 40 blocks of houses and neighbourhoods was gone. The sound I made was for all of the people that I know who lost everything."

Among the saddest parts of the Paradise story in 2018 is that the disaster was completely preventable. The Camp Fire started when a poorly maintained transmission line run by the Pacific Gas And Electric Company (PG&E), one of the biggest power providers in America, was brought down by a downslope wind in the Feather River Canyon. The zephyr subsequently drove the fires through the communities of Concow, Magalia, Butte Creek Canyon and onto Paradise. PG&E had a history of diverting funds from safety measures into profits and, by 2022, the damage caused by the company's negligence during the fire was estimated at $422 billion. The utility ultimately pleaded guilty to 84 counts of involuntary manslaughter.

"At the end of the day, someone has to take responsibility," says Curtis. "I hope *The Lost Bus* stimulates all of us to hold the corporate entities that run so much of our lives to account. We as citizens have the opportunity to demand those corporations act responsibly and respectfully and be partners with us, not just entities that don't give a shit."

Greengrass, who cut his teeth speaking truth to power as a documentarian for landmark ITV strand *World In Action*, understands the anger around corporate cost-cutting ("If I was living in Paradise, I'd be incensed"), but for him *The Lost Bus* isn't about raging against capitalism; it's about landing on a clear-eyed veracity.

"I don't like bleak films," he explains. "I don't think I make bleak films. Even *United 93*, although it had a desperate ending, didn't feel bleak. I think bleakness is the enemy of cinema but equally, sentimentality is too. So, I'm just trying to find my own path that is true to the world I see." Some sparks, it seems, can never be extinguished.

THE LOST BUS **IS IN CINEMAS FROM SEPTEMBER 19 AND ON APPLE TV+ FROM OCTOBER 3**

RISING UP

HE'S CEMENTED HIMSELF AS ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING ACTORS AROUND. NOW, AS HARRIS DICKINSON UNVEILS HIS DIRECTORIAL DEBUT, HE TELLS US WHY HE KEEPS PUSHING THINGS FORWARD

WORDS **BETH WEBB** PIP

Harris Dickinson, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in London on August 5, 2025.

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FOR THE BEST PART OF A DECADE

Harris Dickinson has used the screen to portray masculinity in all of its shades. From his startlingly vulnerable debut in 2017's *Beach Rats* — which saw the London-born actor play a teen Brooklynite wrestling with his sexuality — Dickinson has never shied away from knotty men. Whether flying through the ring as a pro-wrestler in *The Iron Claw* or quietly scowling as a Larry David-esque Instagram boyfriend in *Triangle Of Sadness*, his characters have always been larger than the sum of their parts, yet grounded by Dickinson's all-in approach, the result of humble beginnings and hard graft.

Dickinson recently set the internet ablaze via his muscular dance moves in *Babygirl*, while he is currently preparing for his most high-profile role to date, as John Lennon in Sam Mendes' Beatles tetralogy, set for release in 2028. Yet when *Empire* catches up with the actor for our photo-shoot at a warehouse in his native East London, he brushes off, for reasons that will become clear, our suggestion that he's on the brink of a new era.

Urchin is Dickinson's feature debut as a writer-director. The story, which he started writing in 2020, follows Mike (Frank Dillane), a London outcast — and very much a knotty character — trying to land on his feet while navigating the rough waves of addiction and trauma. It's a deeply personal film for Dickinson, not only because he works closely with his local homeless community, but because he pours his lived experience into every frame, from the jobs he worked as a kid to the lessons that he's learned from Hollywood and beyond. Here in his hometown, he walks us through the journey that led him behind the camera, and where he's headed next.

In *Urchin*, Mike feels like an extension of a lot of the characters that you've played. [*Babygirl* filmmaker] Halina Reijn described your performance in *Beach Rats* as "the boy and the man in one". Why are you drawn to characters who veer between behaving like both?
Because that's what we're all doing, aren't we? We're all trying to pretend not to be these little kids that we once were. On a very Freudian level, we're all trying to figure out how to navigate our lives in a way that's deeply confusing. At least I feel that, and I'm constantly battling with my own understanding of adulthood and maturity and masculinity and how to move through the world in a way that feels "correct".

How does that play out in Mike?
He's rejected responsibility as a way of coping with his own trauma. You see that time and time again with people who have been through traumatic events; they reject any sort of accountability because it's easier to do that. To escape. I was interested in the idea of a man-child who has never been able to find their own direction.

Physicality also feels important to you. In films like *Triangle Of Sadness*, *Babygirl* and *The Iron Claw*, you were putting your body out there in interesting, often challenging ways. Is that something that you're seeking out more of?
Whenever I'm given a role that requires some sense of change, it's always beneficial for me. I feel very in touch with my body. I like to move and dance. So I think that it's natural for me to think about that side of it.

How does it feel to push your limits when it comes to your physicality?
The Iron Claw was specifically hard because it required muscle gain and a specific kind of training. I've pushed my body to both extremes. I lost a lot of weight when I was 21, 22, when I did a series with Danny Boyle [2018's Getty oil-drama *Trust*]. There was a naivety to it. I didn't really have a support network, I just did it on my own. I did it very unsafely, and I struggled with that and I have to rethink projects now because of that.

Was this something you were mindful of when you were working with Frank on *Urchin*?
Frank is a really physical performer. He really put himself through a lot and lost a lot of weight [to play Mike]. He messed up his shoulder because of how much he was hunching. I'd see that and I'd get worried because I'd also been on the other side of it. So as a director I was constantly making sure he'd had his food.

How else has your background in acting informed how you direct people?
It's really vulnerable, isn't it, acting? It's an embarrassing process — well, it is for me — it's a weird and humiliating thing, and feels rather silly at times. So I'm constantly having that in my head when I'm directing and creating the right setting for actors in order to feel comfortable. Then when comfortability comes, I think good performances can come because you're able to access stuff and lose inhibition. If you've got the wrong settings, then it doesn't work.

***Beach Rats* was your first time on a film set as a lead actor. How do you remember it?**
It was a very small production with a very low budget. We were almost getting arrested for filming on the subway, and I thought that this was what all film shoots were like. I loved it — I wanted it to be guerilla because I'd been making short films as a kid like that. So I was like, "Great, this is a step up from that," but the energy and the desperation is still there, and nothing else matters other than what we're getting in the moment, and the sacred feeling of that. I was obsessed with it. ›

Above: Mike (Frank Dillane) in *Urchin*. **Left:** The film is Dickinson's directorial debut.

Previous page: Shirt, trousers and belt: Auralee; Vest: Harris' own; Shoes: GH Bass.
This page: Suit: Carter Young; Jumper: Studio Nicholson; T-shirt: Sunspel; Trainers: Axel Arigato

You watched a lot of films growing up, before you began acting. When did you start to notice things like camerawork and the craft of filmmaking?
I watched *American Beauty* when I was young and I remember seeing one of those top shots (*signals a camera looking down*) and thinking, "Oh, this is an extremely specific kind of camera." The same with *Donnie Darko* — I have older brothers so they would often have films on that I probably shouldn't have been watching. And then I just loved behind-the-scenes videos. I was always rushing to the Blockbuster near us; obviously they had VHS and DVDs and I'd be upset when they didn't have the longer featurettes on them, because that was the perfect thing to watch afterwards.

Did you consult with directors you'd worked with while you were making *Urchin*?
It was more like beforehand. Ruben [Östlund] helped because we were filming the end of *Triangle Of Sadness* when I was editing my short film (*2021's 13-minute drama* 2003, *about a young soldier about to embark on a tour of duty*). We were on the beach in Greece and the crew decided to do a small film festival because we had some time, and I had the film on my USB and I was like, "This is not ready but maybe I just... Fuck it, why not?" I spoke to Ruben about it and I was saying, "I want to change things but I can't because it's already locked," and he was like, "It's your film. Change it. Listen to your gut."

***Triangle Of Sadness* introduced a lot of people to your comedic skills. Is humour important in your work?**
Triangle Of Sadness certainly gave me a chance to perform in a different realm. Ruben is incredible at situational and observational comedy. I think that's always been a big part of who I am, though. I love comedy and I'm quite stupid. Comedy was probably the route into acting for me (*growing up, Dickinson made comedy shorts and Vines*), because making people laugh has this weird empowerment thing. Good, smart comedy is hard to come by. It's hard to crack.

Why did you choose to include humour in *Urchin*?
I think it was important, because the backdrop of the story could've very easily been bleak and misunderstood. From my experience and doing research within that community, I think that there's a lot of humour in this world and with these people, because it's a way out. People who have been to the extreme end of morality are often the ones who can be the most humorous. Because they've got nothing to lose.

You filmed part of *Urchin* in the London hotel where you used to work. How did it feel to be back?
It was wild and quite emotional. I stopped working there when I was about 21, and my impression was that it was still a hotel. But when we went back it had been bought by this private company and they were renting out the rooms as short-term accommodation. It had this sadness to it, because I had known it as a bustling hotel. It had faded and dampened and the ceiling had caved in. But I remember going back into the kitchen and the smell was the same. When I started writing the film I set it there, never with the expectation of shooting there, but because I knew the spaces so well.

What was your time working there like?
I worked a lot of late-night shifts and the manager was really kind to me. When I started to get auditions through he would let me take the time off. I remember I got an [acting] job and I quit the hotel. I was like, "That's me done." Then I finished the job and very quickly realised that it doesn't work like that: you still need an income because that money's gone already. So I limped back in and asked for my job back and he gave it to me.

You described *Urchin* being accepted into Cannes as "like taking your prized goat to the goat fair" and then worrying, "How did I end up here? My goat is not ready or good enough." How do you feel about the goat now?
The goat did well. The goat did really well. I don't know if the goat was ready but it jumped through the hoops, it did the tricks. People liked the goat. People stroked the goat, and perhaps the goat's ego got a little big, and now the goat is ready to come back to reality.

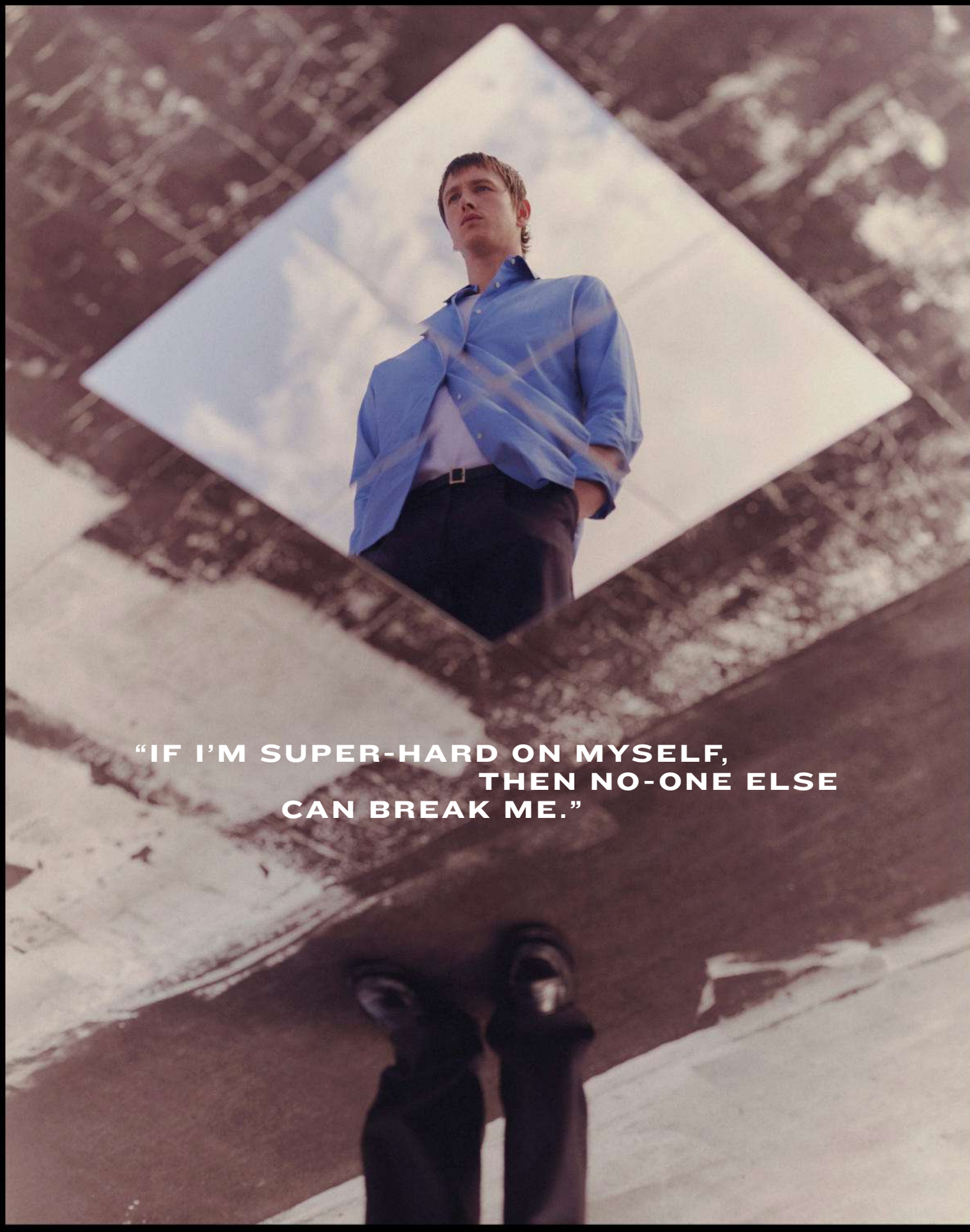
The goat has come out during a time when your status is shifting, especially after the release of *Babygirl*, which seemed to broaden your fanbase. You've mentioned that you try to keep some distance from how you're perceived by the public, but are you finding that harder to do now?
I've always tried to separate my own self from me as an actor in order for me to cope. Getting recognised has definitely picked up, which is a strange one. For the most part they're positive encounters, which I feel lucky for. People just want to say something nice and that what you've done has resonated with them and then move on. It feels counter-intuitive to deny that; to pretend that you're not in the public domain. But yeah, I think that separation is important, and not letting that define your sense of self. Not to be overly philosophical about it, but the more you engage with it, the more it will destabilise you. I've noticed that the more I engage with what's being said, or with reviews, the less stable I feel. The best way is to understand it, have gratitude, and then carry on with the work.

Do you think that might be harder to do over the next few years?
I don't know.

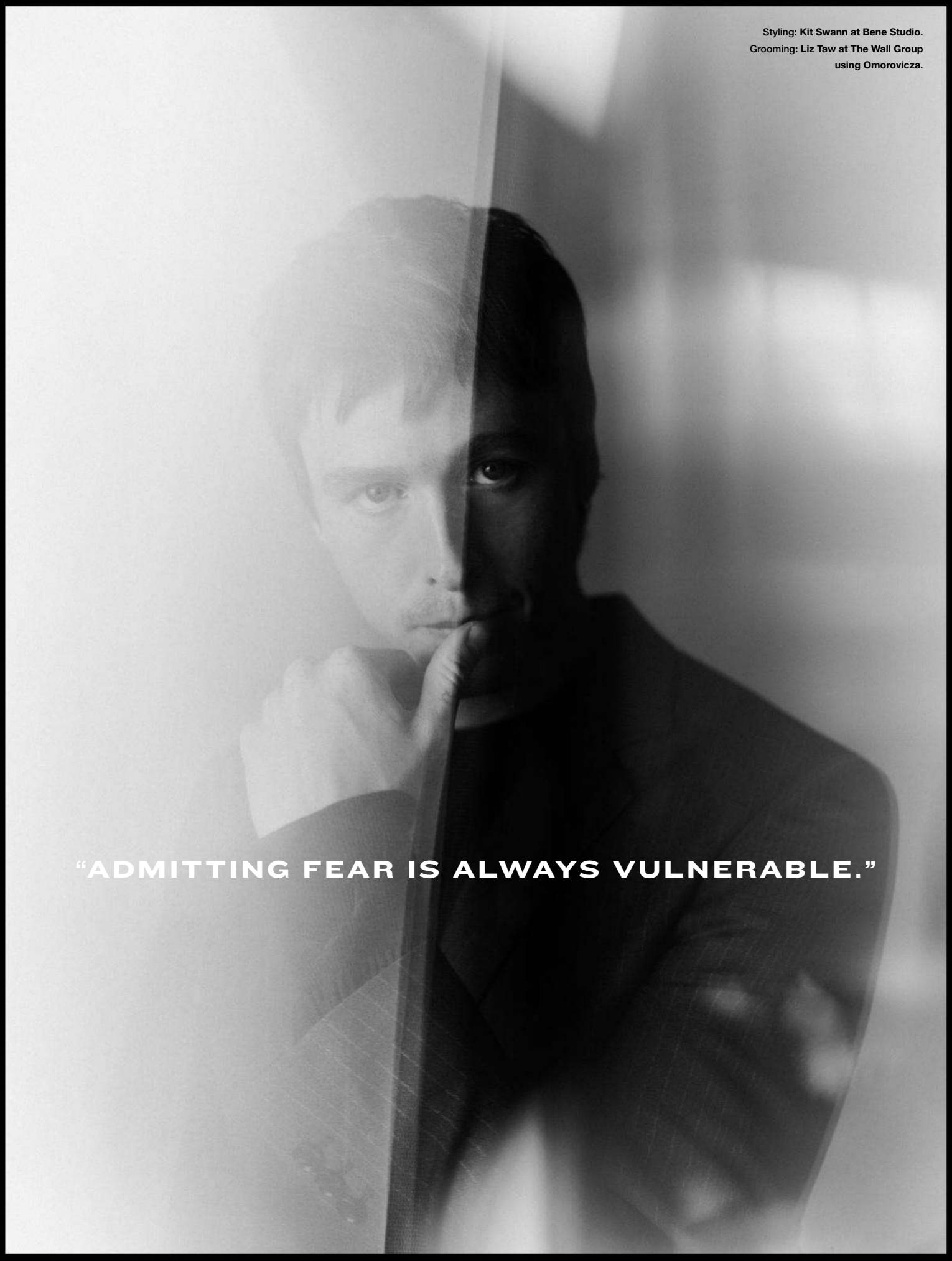
Is that scary?
(*Pauses*) Um, well, admitting fear is always vulnerable. ›

Clockwise from top right: As Frankie in *Beach Rats* (2017); Carl in *Triangle Of Sadness* (2022); *Babygirl*'s (2024) sexy Samuel; In *The Iron Claw* (2023) as wrestler David Von Erich.

Opposite: Shirt, trousers and belt: Auralee; Vest: Harris' own; Shoes: GH Bass



“IF I’M SUPER-HARD ON MYSELF, THEN NO-ONE ELSE CAN BREAK ME.”



Styling: **Kit Swann at Bene Studio.**
Grooming: **Liz Taw at The Wall Group using Omorovicza.**

“ADMITTING FEAR IS ALWAYS VULNERABLE.”

Because things are obviously going to be quite different during that time.
(*Pauses*) Why do you say that?

Because you're playing John Lennon and the whole world and their dads will come to your doorstep.
(*Laughing*) Don't say that!

Well, your metaphorical doorstep.
This thing is I just don't believe that... (*exhales*). I just don't think that I'm that interesting. I don't think people care in that sense.

Even if you think that, the person you're playing is very interesting to people.
Yeah, he's a pretty interesting bloke. (*Laughs*) But I'm not him. I don't know, it's a speculative question, isn't it? Check back in in four years. I'll be a mess.

You had lunch with your *Iron Claw* co-star [Jeremy Allen White] last year while he was preparing to play Bruce Springsteen in *Deliver Me From Nowhere*. How did it feel to speak with someone who was embarking on a similar journey?
Well, he'd just started rehearsals, and I hadn't started anything; I was in that comfortable, unfearful zone where I was floating along waiting for things to start. And he seemed just as comfortable, to be honest. I love Jeremy so much — he's one of those actors I'm in awe of, even when I was working with him. And it made me feel like, yeah, I've got someone who understands a bit.

You're simultaneously working on those huge films while promoting *Urchin*, which is very raw and personal. How are you finding pivoting between both worlds?
Again, for me there's a real separation. Somehow I'm able to step between the two. It was easier because I had a year where I didn't act and I just made *Urchin*. It was a clear focus. Now I'm promoting it and sharing it with the world. And I'm in Beatles world, and I'm loving that, and it's a great challenge. I keep my mind on that, but step out. I think it's unhealthy to have one sole thing that your brain is working on. It's healthy for me to have a few things to work on, maybe to my sleep's dismay.

You mentioned that *American Beauty* was a formative film for you. What's it like now working with Sam Mendes, who directed it?
It's wild, because that was his first film. The thing is, you deify these people and then you meet them and they're also really lovely, humility-filled, silly people. That was refreshing when I started to meet Sam, because historically we're led to believe that if someone's a genius, they're excused from being an arsehole. Particularly men. If men are rude, people will say, "Oh, but, they're geniuses." I don't agree with that sentiment. You should be able to be a good person as well.

You're very open about how competitive your industry is. Do you find that you compete with yourself?
I think that I'm the only person that I'm competitive with.

What are you competing for now?
I think the fear always exists in me that the goat is only as good as the last time it went to the fair. Maybe that's all I'm thinking of — that I've got to continually try and do better than what I've done. It's probably normal. I don't think it's a unique perspective. But I'm my own worst critic. My harshest critic. And I think that's a coping thing. Like, if I'm super-hard on myself, then no-one else can break me.

It's interesting to hear you say this in what feels like a milestone year for you.
But I think that if I didn't do that then I would be complacent and then I'd probably just be crap. I'm a restless person, and it's something that I'm trying to work on, but it drives me and it makes me want to find new things that challenge and scare me. It's healthy in parts and unhealthy in others, but if I'm reaching for a certain thing, and I'm trying to do great stuff and work with great people, I can't settle. It's never a given. There was a time when I was a bit younger, when I was about three years in and I was auditioning and trying to get bits. And there was a point where I was like, "Maybe I don't want to do this. Maybe I can't handle not getting jobs." To be in the place that I'm in now feels like such a stroke of luck.

You still feel that you're here because of luck?
I've worked hard, and I've put in a huge amount of time and effort. But so do a lot of people. Not everyone gets the opportunity to work in the space that I do.

What does your filmmaking journey look like now that *Urchin*'s done? Is there something you're dying to do?
I want to direct seven Marvel films in a row.

Really?
No.

You have acted, though, in some big popcorn movies like *Maleficent* and *The King's Man*. Would you ever want to direct one?
No, no, no. I want to make the films that I want to make. I want to make entertaining films — I'm definitely audience-conscious, especially after my first film. I want people to engage with my work on a wider level, like making great adult adventure stories. Sean Baker said at the London Film Festival that *Anora* is an adult cinema experience, and that's what I want to do. I want to make films that are high-quality with incredible acting but have humour and that come directly from me in my own voice, that hasn't been messed with. I don't know exactly what that will be like. But I think that's an okay ambition.

URCHIN IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 3

Above: As Prince Philip in *Maleficent: Mistress Of Evil* (2019).
Left: Gun-toting Conrad Oxford in *The King's Man* (2021).

Opposite: Suit: Carter Young; Jumper: Studio Nicholson; T-shirt: Sunspel; Trainers: Axel Arigato. Additional imagery: A24, Disney, Picturehouse Entertainment

the EMPIRE Deep Dive

IN OUR REGULAR SERIES, WE EXPLORE A SLICE OF CINEMA LORE

THIS MONTH

THE APE-SUIT KING

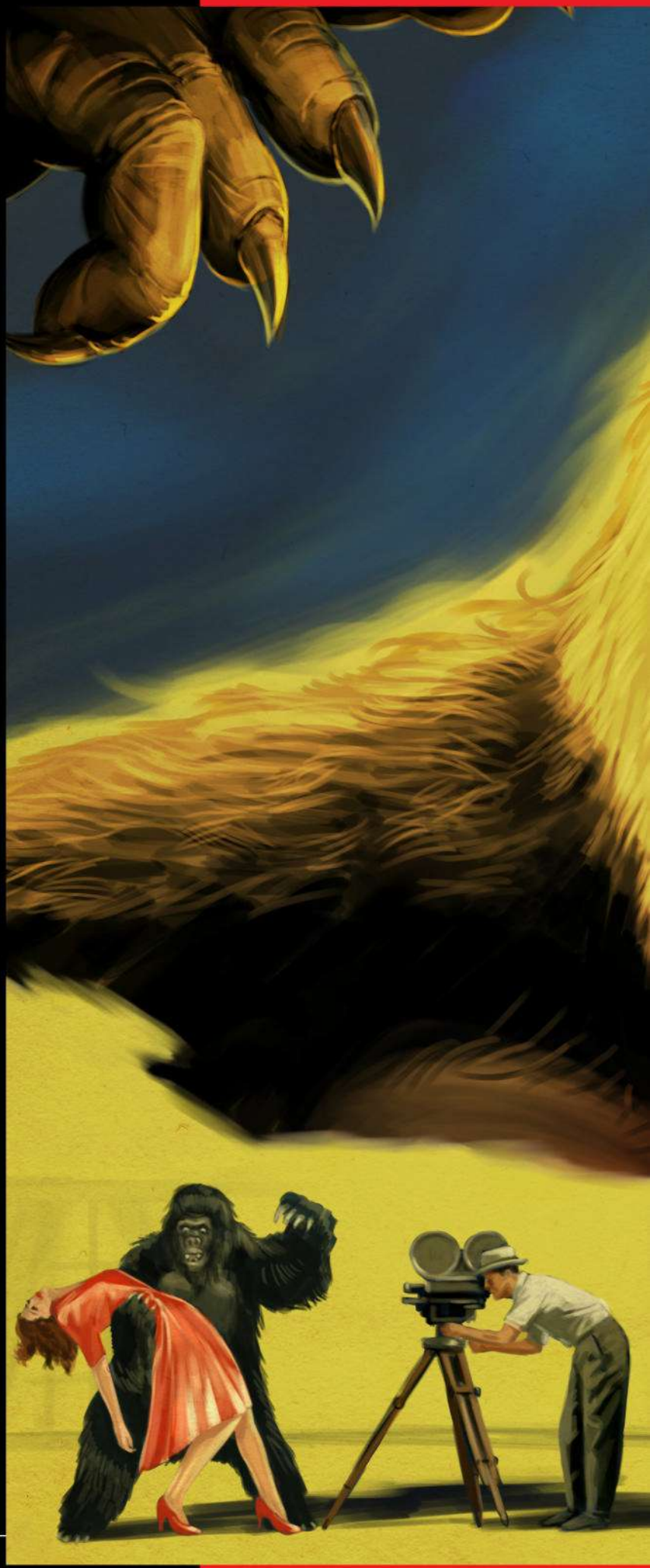
WORDS **BRIAN J. ROBB**

THE RED DRESS

THE JUNGLE DRUMS beat and the exotic dancing-girls shimmy in, followed closely by a skulking — but strangely human-looking — gorilla. As the intoxicating music plays, the ape languorously makes its way through an apprehensive audience, coming to a stop close by Cary Grant. Slowly, the inhabitant of the gorilla suit removes the gloves, then the head — revealing a showgirl played by Marlene Dietrich. It's an unforgettable moment from 1932's *Blonde Venus*, but it wasn't Dietrich in the monkey suit for most of that scene. That was one Charles Gemora.

Years earlier, when Gemora stowed away on a cargo vessel — making his way from the Philippines to Hollywood aged just 15 — he had no idea he'd be the prime practitioner of a new form of bizarre costume-acting. After a start as a production artist at Universal Studios in the early 1920s, he enjoyed a multi-decade career that saw him crowned 'King Of The Gorilla Men'. By creating his own realistic gorilla outfits, he became the go-to guy for primate performances. He also designed sets, innovated in movie make-up, and helped create a non-staining fake blood. However, those were just sidelines: from the 1920s to the '60s, the diminutive actor focused on mostly uncredited stints of monkeying about. Gemora wouldn't shake off the ape suit as easily as Dietrich had, and he was happy not to.

Born Carlos Cruz Gemora in 1903, on the island of Negros in the Philippines, he was the youngest of nine kids, and fled a festering family feud about mineral wealth and land rights when he was just nine years old. After his father's untimely death, Gemora's oldest brother plotted to keep the family fortune for himself, and when Gemora returned home, his family placed him in a monastery, which turned out to be useful — he educated himself by studying the library's extensive ›



collection of art books.

At 15, he left home again, stowing away on a cargo vessel bound for San Francisco, and during the 12-day voyage he turned hero when a stuck pressure-valve threatened an explosion. It could only be accessed by a smaller person, and the 5' 2" Gemora fitted the bill, becoming the toast of the crew. Instead of hiding below decks, he arrived in the United States with his head held high. The still-teen Gemora then won a *San Francisco Chronicle* art contest where he was commended for his "detailed work". As a sign of things to come, he won a pair of movie tickets, and following a few years in menial jobs, he headed south to find his true calling in Tinseltown.

Arriving in Los Angeles, now Charles instead of Carlos, Gemora hung around outside Universal Studios, sketching the stars as they passed through the hallowed gates, in-between attending 'cattle call' auditions for extras. Eventually, he was invited inside, winning an extra's role on 1923's *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*, starring Lon Chaney. Gemora was just about to turn 20.

Chaney — who made a career creating and performing in his own outlandish make-ups — was a major influence on Gemora, who appeared in the crowd scenes outside Notre Dame. Also his constant sketching saw his artistic skills recognised when he was put to work designing the gargoyles that featured prominently on the cathedral. "They made a sculptor out of me," Gemora wryly noted, "on the assumption, I guess, that if you can draw, you can work with clay." He followed Chaney to 1925's *The Phantom Of The Opera*, graduating to full art-department duties and contributing to the design of the spectacular opera-house set. He soon gained a reputation as a meticulous production artist and costume designer, making contributions to 1924's *The Thief Of Bagdad* and 1926's *The Black Pirate*, both with Douglas Fairbanks, as well as Michael Curtiz's disaster opus *Noah's Ark* (1928).

Gemora's monkey business, though, had started with another design job, when he was tasked with creating a gorilla for 1925's *The Lost World*, based on the Arthur Conan Doyle novel. While animator Willis O'Brien (who would later animate King Kong) looked after the movie's stop-motion dinosaurs, Gemora not only designed but constructed the ape suit. Inventing another one for the 1927 comedy short *Goose Flesh* — and unhappy that his earlier carefully crafted, ultra-realistic outfit had been ruined by an unsubtle performance by Italian professional wrestler Luigi Montagna, aka 'Bull Montana' — Gemora decided that he was ideal to fit the costume. That was followed by the 1928 feature *The Leopard Lady*, where he once again pulled off the double task of building an ape-suit and performing in it.

As the craze for all things simian grew (it had been partly sparked by the 1925 Scopes 'Monkey Trial', where a Texas high-school teacher was accused of breaking the ban on teaching evolution, as documented in Stanley Kramer's 1960 film *Inherit The Wind*), international newspaper coverage further fuelled a fascination with apes and chimps, man's closest relatives in the animal kingdom. A fascination that Charles Gemora would trade upon in his burgeoning reign as the swinging sultan of simian cinema.

Charles Gemora preps to play Ethel in Laurel and Hardy's *The Chimp* (1932).

Gemora set out to carve himself a unique niche as a character actor — he would be the most lifelike ape interpreter ever known. Even better, he could supply his own costume. He innovated using black make-up around his eyes to blend with the mask (a technique picked up by Tim Burton and Michael Keaton for 1989's *Batman*). His human eyes were visible in the ape face for emotive close-ups. His body suit was padded with 'kapok', a silk-like stuffing used in mattresses. Designed for heat insulation, it caused Gemora to sweat uncontrollably, especially under hot studio lights.

To create realistic movements as he ambled around, he installed a water-filled bag in the suit's stomach, lending extra realism. He built extensions into the arms for the signature long-arm gorilla look, allowing him to emulate the on-all-fours stance of real apes; his actual arms reached as far as the suit's elbow, with grips that he used to manipulate the longer arms. He constructed each suit from scratch, creating at least six across three decades.

The floodgates opened, and Gemora became Hollywood's Mr Monkey — he was much more reliable than a real ape, and responded better to direction. His appearances ranged from comedy shorts (1928's *Do Gentlemen Snore*?) to jungle pictures (1928's *Tarzan The Mighty*), and offbeat dramas (1929's *Seven Footprints To Satan*). He was now making $500 each week he turned ape, which was just as well: he was addicted to gambling and lost his $1 million investment in the US stock market in the 1929 crash.

One of Gemora's most intriguing credits was *Ingagi* (1930), playing the title gorilla. The movie was controversial — director William Campbell claimed it depicted genuine exploration into deepest Africa, but it was an exploitation flick, filmed along the Los Angeles river using Californian locals, and featuring gorillas running off with 'native' women in the Congo. It was a huge hit, saving distributor RKO from bankruptcy (and encouraging them to

Alamy, Getty Images, Shutterstock, Photofest

Left: Wrestling with Frank Merrill in *Tarzan The Mighty* (1928). **Here:** William Campbell's controversial *Ingagi* (1930).

"INGAGI"
"GORILLA"
The Wonder Film!
COMBINING AUTHENTIC ADVENTURE FILM
WITH the PORTRAYAL of an UNBELIEVABLE
TRIBAL LEGEND OF THE CONGO!
A MILLION THRILLS FROM HEART OF AFRICAN JUNGLE

Left: *Ingagi* — not in fact from "heart of African jungle" at all. **Top:** In 1932's *Blonde Venus*, starring (above) Marlene Dietrich. **Below:** With Ollie and Stan in *Swiss Miss* (1938).

make 1933's *King Kong*). However, marketed as an 'ethnographic documentary', *Ingagi* was exposed as a fraud when someone spotted an actor they knew as a 'tribesman'. Having initially denied any involvement, Gemora was stalked by a private eye engaged by trade association The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Coming clean, he signed an affidavit confirming his participation and clarifying that filming got no nearer Africa than the Los Angeles zoo. *Ingagi* was then banned.

The opportunities now available saw Gemora take his ape art more seriously. He'd hang out for hours at San Diego Zoo, observing apes in action, learning to imitate their movements and behaviour, studying their pelts to improve his costumes. He hand-wove human and yak hair into the skins, mixing straight and curly hair to mimic an ape's distinctive matted pelt. All of this fed into his portrayals, improving his performances and convincing viewers they were seeing real apes.

Gemora continued his furry work for the next 30 years, mostly uncredited. He became especially known for his work in horror and thrillers, appearing with Charles Laughton in 1932's *Island Of Lost Souls* (as both a gorilla and the mutant 'Gorilla Man') and Bela Lugosi in the same year's *Murders In The Rue Morgue* (his close-ups replaced with some of a real chimp). According to his daughter Diana, on *Island Of Lost Souls* "the promotion department wanted the public to think a real gorilla was being used, and kept Charlie in a cage for several days while in public view".

Much of his best work, though, was in comedy. In 1932, he displayed excellent comic timing with Laurel and Hardy in *The Chimp*, adding a fetching tutu to his usual get-up, and in *Swiss Miss* (1938), where his angry gorilla confronts Stan and Ollie as they haul a piano across a rope bridge. As an antic ape, he hijacked a plane (*Hawkins & Watkins, Inc*, 1932), ran amuck on a cruise ship (*Bum Voyage*, 1934), and menaced the Marx Brothers (*At The Circus*, 1939). He appeared opposite Bob Hope and ›

Bing Crosby in *Road to Zanzibar* (1941) and *Road To Utopia* (1945), and with Abbott and Costello in 1949's *Africa Screams*, opposite real chimps.

Gemora's own favourite was 1941's *The Monster And The Girl*. "It was the most realistic, and his acting ability came to the forefront," said his daughter Diana. "He showed that gorillas have pathos. He was a great mime." Stuart Heisler's film begins as a courtroom drama before George Zucco's mad scientist puts the brain of a wrongly executed man into a gorilla, and as the human-ape hybrid, Gemora enacts a rampage of revenge, offing the gangsters that set him up. "I probably got more gorilla time in that film than any other movie I ever did," Gemora told historian Bob Burns. The film ironically credits Skipper the dog on screen, but fails to mention Gemora.

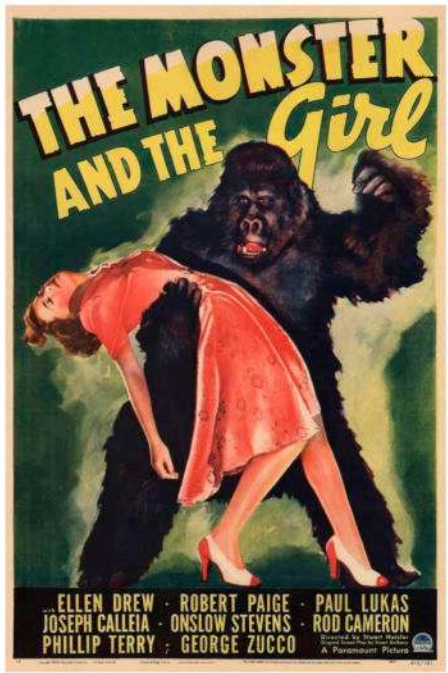
He was not alone in owning a gorilla outfit and hiring himself out: his less successful rivals included George Barrows (notorious for *Robot Monster*, 1953), Ray 'Crash' Corrigan (in chapter-play serials), Steve Calvert (1948's B-movie *Jungle Jim*), Emil Van Horn (1943's *The Ape Man*), and Janos Prohaska (in monster suits on 1960s TV). None of them, though, rivalled Gemora in his position as Hollywood's prime primate.

Charlie Gemora's innovation went way beyond hairy suits. As well as the aforementioned non-staining movie blood, he had a hand in creating self-propelling lipstick, fake eyelashes (used by Dorothy Lamour, among others), an automatic tissue dispenser, and latex for scars and masks. He developed make-up techniques for more realistic scarring, wounds, and ageing effects: he aged Barbara Stanwyck for *The Great Man's Lady* (1942) so well that she asked Gemora to paint her portrait.

Alongside all of this, his sideline in practical effects was also flourishing. It included significant science-fiction and horror titles like 1940's *Dr. Cyclops* (for which he created oversized sets and props, as well as a giant mechanical hand) and 1958's *I Married A Monster From Outer Space* (he designed — and played — a pretzel-faced alien), as well as a host of mainstream classics including *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1940), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

For 1953's *The War Of The Worlds*, the Martian creature was a last-minute addition after the producer rejected the original design: Gemora had one night to create something new for shooting the next day. The brief glimpse of the alien had a huge impact, helped by Ann Robinson's screams, making the film one of the

Above: Early horror *Murders In The Rue Morgue* (1932). **Below, top to bottom:** Producer Hal Roach with his *Chimp* stars; *The Monster And the Girl* (1941).


THE MONSTER AND THE Girl
ELLEN DREW · ROBERT PAIGE · PAUL LUKAS
JOSEPH CALLEIA · ONSLOW STEVENS · ROD CAMERON
PHILLIP TERRY · GEORGE ZUCCO

1950s' most memorable monster flicks. Elsewhere, Gemora sculpted the scaly, silvery tail for *Mr. Peabody And The Mermaid* (1948), created the swarm of ants that menaced Charlton Heston in *The Naked Jungle* (1954), built the iconic suit for the robot giant of *The Colossus Of New York* (1958), and sewed-up lips and made shrunken heads for 1959's *The Four Skulls Of Jonathan Drake*.

Halfway through shooting 1954's *Phantom Of The Rue Morgue*, Gemora suffered his second heart attack (following a first, 14 years earlier), forcing him to hand over his ape-suit to another actor to complete the film. The strain on his system of all those ape antics finally caught up with him, even though he'd just turned 50. "His suit actually shortened his life," claimed his daughter Diana. "The acrobatics and weight were hard on his poor heart." In response to doctors' warnings, Gemora reduced his physically active onscreen work, with his final ape performances coming in *Mardi Gras* (1958) and *Flight Of The Lost Balloon* (1961). He now focused solely on make-up, including on *Jack The Giant Killer*, which was filmed in 1960, and eventually released in 1962, and worked with Marlon Brando on the star's directorial debut, *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961).

Across his life, Charles Gemora only received 12 onscreen credits (seven for make-up, five as gorillas), yet worked on over 100 films in front of and behind the camera. He suffered a third heart attack in 1961, this time fatal. He was just 58. "King Kong might have died for love of his lady," said his daughter, "but Charlie died for love of a gorilla."

Through the decades following Gemora's pioneering ape escapades, gorilla suits infiltrated the mainstream — from David Warner in *Morgan: A Suitable Case For Treatment* (1966), via the opening scenes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), to Rick Baker inhabiting the suit in the 1976 remake of *King Kong*. Even James Bond got in on the action — Roger Moore briefly dons a gorilla outfit in 1983's *Octopussy*. As John Landis once claimed: "There is no movie that wouldn't be improved by a guy in a gorilla suit!"

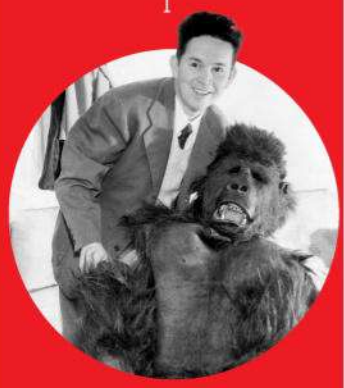
Long before the modern *Planet Of The Apes* series was populated by CG creations, and before Robbie Williams was portrayed as a photo-realistic chimp in 2024's *Better Man*, Charles Gemora carved a unique niche as king of the cinematic simians. Throughout his life in Hollywood, he zipped up his hairy costume for dozens of movies. As he once wisely noted: "The guy with the gorilla suit always gets work."

Clockwise from top left: In *Murders In The Rue Morgue*; Another take on the Edgar Allan Poe story — 1954's *Phantom Of The Rue Morgue* — again starred Gemora; *The Monster And The Girl* — notably no credit for the man in the ape suit; Getting into his self-designed Martian suit for *The War Of The Worlds* (1953).

GO FIGURE

CHARLES GEMORA'S VITAL STATS

2
Gorillas studied at San Diego Zoo



6
Gorilla suits created across three decades

75lbs
Weight of a typical gorilla suit

8-10
Pounds lost daily in his ape suits

2
Times he was credited as 'Sir Charles the Gorilla'

$2,500
Weekly fee for doing make-up in the 1950s

4
Non-ape costume roles (two aliens, a bear, and a cannibal)

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

OCTOBER 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Out of the Void

THUNDERBOLTS* DIRECTOR JAKE SCHREIER ON (FINALLY) MAKING HIS MARK ON THE MCU

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"I AM AWARE," says Jake Schreier, "that my career makes zero sense on paper. There's no through-line to any of it. And you know what? I don't care anymore about that so much."

The 43-year-old director isn't kidding, by the way. He burst onto the scene as an indie darling-in-waiting in 2012, with the excellent *Robot & Frank*, and quickly added the quirky and heartfelt teen dramedy *Paper Towns* in 2015. Both movies got him in the room with Marvel Studios, for meetings on *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (which went, in the end, to Schreier's film-school roommate Jon Watts). But after that, while he kept plenty busy directing music videos, commercials and TV with the likes of *Lodge 49*, *Kidding* and Lee Sung Jin's *Beef*, that was it for him on the big screen. Until this summer, when he finally made his Marvel with *Thunderbolts**. It's unlikely that there'll be any ten-year gaps on the CV after this. Because that movie (which you might also call 'The New Avengers', now we know what that bloody asterisk stands for) was one of the freshest MCU entries in quite a while, bringing together a motley crew of Marvel's most unwanted, and fashioning a fun, quirky and emotionally affecting story that dared to be about big subjects (mental health, trauma).

It didn't pull up as many money trees as you might expect from a Marvel movie, but it's clear that Kevin Feige and co appreciated Schreier's work, because the night before *Empire* jumps onto a Zoom with him to talk about life post-*Thunderbolts**, it's announced that Schreier will be calling the shots on the studio's much-anticipated X-Men movie. Suddenly, that career is starting to make a lot of sense...

***Thunderbolts** feels like a personal movie; like an indie movie made under the umbrella of the MCU. But were you nervous about how it was going to be received?*

We didn't set out to make an indie movie. I know we had our funny 'A24' trailer (which referenced the likes of *Minari*, *Hereditary* and *The Green Knight*), that's a bit tongue-in-cheek. From the beginning, I think Kevin [Feige] recognised that cookie-cutter wasn't going to work for this anyway, that we had to take a swing. This movie, given that it's not one of the most famous [Marvel properties], there was no version of playing it safe. That felt very freeing. It was no more terrifying than just doing one of these things at all. It's hard, and it definitely was a learning curve. But there was so much support for that. It isn't like I ran away with this thing and, without telling anyone, tried to make some indie movie.

It seems to me that the third act, where you're tackling and depicting mental health in a way that would usually be anathema to a movie of this size, is what people have

Clockwise from main: The new Avengers; Director Jake Schreier with Florence Pugh on set; On a high: Pugh prepares.

really connected with — with Bob (Lewis Pullman), and with Yelena (Florence Pugh). When you have great actors, it makes all of this stuff easier. What I said going in was, "If we're gonna do this, I don't want to do it reductively." There are too many people that have experienced this that if we put up a simplified version of it, or if it felt like you could just punch out your trauma, that would make me feel bad. What's also nice is that the actors took it so seriously as well. They wouldn't let it be an oversimplified version. I don't know how you take in what people took from it exactly, or what the healthy way to do that is. Certainly, scrolling the internet is not the healthiest thing to do. But I've had people come up to me and be like, "I really relate to Bob," and that always feels nice, to make something where people feel they can see some version of themselves in it. ›

Top left: Sentry (Lewis Pullman). **Here:** John Walker (Wyatt Russell), Ava Starr (Hannah John-Kamen) and Yelena Belova (Pugh) fight back.

I really like how you depicted the Void, Bob's dark personality, as a menacing, pitch-black silhouette. When did you hit upon that idea?
We sort of just ran out of other options. Kevin kept pushing us. He was like, "Is there a way to do this photographically? Can we just do this in camera? No more CG monsters!" Essentially, it's just rotoscoping Lewis. It's his performance, and then finding, with some care so it doesn't feel like a filter, a little bit of depth within the silhouette. The details matter so much. If you leave the eyes on all the time, it feels like a robot, or creepy in a way that doesn't feel interesting. I think that it goes back to the first movie I ever made, called *Robot & Frank*, where we had no money and had this little plastic robot, like a person in a suit. But it's the same concept. We went faceless with that. There were early concepts that would make expressions and stuff, but you want to engage the imagination. Sometimes, if you give people less, it can do so much more for you.

This almost wasn't your first Marvel rodeo. You were one of the directors they talked to about *Guardians Of The Galaxy* in the immediate aftermath of *Robot & Frank*. What was that experience like for you?
I mean, I didn't know what was going on. I didn't have an agent or a manager when I made *Robot & Frank*. So I came out to LA, and all of a sudden I was meeting all these people. Jon Watts and I were living together in Mount Washington. We were roommates, like we had been in college. They were talking, like, "Yeah, we want to do this Guardians Of The Galaxy thing... there's a tree and a talking raccoon." And I think Jon was like, "They're not going to make that movie!" I was like, "I don't know, they seem like they want to." This was a different time. That meeting was set for the Friday [*Avengers Assemble*] came out. I had to stay up 'til two in the morning watching *Avengers*, because I didn't want to not have seen it going into the meeting. I brought them Champagne. I didn't know what I was doing. I was like, "Congratulations!" And they're like, "Alright, let's talk about this movie." There was no resting on laurels. And I found that so impressive. I just wasn't ready for a movie like that. That movie is so much what James [Gunn] made it, and he did such incredible work. But it was just a very, very funny early Hollywood experience.

Maybe it worked out for the best.
They didn't offer me the movie. I met with them about it and I said at the time, "I don't think I'm ready for this." I wouldn't have made it what James made it into. I think it's easy to look back on these opportunities and you think, "If I had done it..." The movie is what it is because of the people who made it, and James and all of those actors made it into something special. If I had done it, I don't know that I would have figured it out. I don't think that I was in a place where I would have known what to do with that. Part of why I was able to work on *Thunderbolts**, and people liked it, is because then Jon did go and work at Marvel, and make these great movies [the *Spider-Man* trilogy] with them. To have the advantage of being his friend, and him really being able to explain how the process works, and how collaborative you have to be, and how that's not a threat to your vision... It's about making something with great people who care. I don't know that I'd have been ready to do that at that time. I just didn't have a frame of reference for any of that. But it's funny. Kevin likes to make fun of me for it.

Again, you met with Marvel on what became *Spider-Man: Homecoming*.
I was coming off of *Paper Towns*, and I met with them. It was Jeremy [Latcham, executive producer] again, and he really wanted to do a John Hughes high-school version of *Spider-Man*, and I had just made a high-school movie. Once again, I felt like I wasn't ready for what that world was. And then Jon went and met him and got it, and the rest is history.

Alamy

Facing page, top to bottom: Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus); *Paper Towns* (2015); *Robot & Frank* (2012). **Left, top to bottom:** Schreier reviews the action on set; Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan) burns rubber.

The fascinating thing is that *Thunderbolts is just your third movie. What happened after *Paper Towns*?**
At various points in my career, and this happened after *Robot & Frank*, there have been movies that I have been developing, that I've tried to get made, that haven't happened. And sometimes I'll take time where I don't engage on other things, even what might seem like good opportunities. Chris Ford (*Watts' writing partner, and writer of* Robot & Frank) and I had a movie that we were trying to get made after *Robot & Frank*, and for a long time I was trying to sort of curate a career. And you spend those times saying 'no', and trying to get your own thing off the ground. Look, there's nothing you don't learn from. I went and made a lot of music videos and I learned so much from being in TV. But there's a lesson in that. At some point I just had to work. The way I look at things now is a little bit less about trying to curate a specific career path, and more just thinking about what experiences you want to have as a director, who you want to work with, and what you think you'll learn from it. Those gaps exist because I wasn't like that. I was uncertain about what I wanted to do, and I was trying to tip the scales in a certain way. I spent a lot of time not working. You can spend three months not working and sitting on your couch and reading stuff, or you can spend three months directing a movie. You'll learn so much more than you do in whole years of your life. As I get older, that's more valuable to me.

"With *Thunderbolts** there was no playing it safe."

And you finished *Thunderbolts, and went straight into *Beef*. There's no break there for you. Is that going to be the case going forward?**
Yeah. I mean, Kevin confirmed it yesterday: I can't say anything about it, but we've started work on *X-Men*, and that's obviously very, very exciting. There are smaller, personal projects that are in the development phase that I want to see if I maybe have time for. I really love what I do, and I feel very, very lucky that I get to do it. That's not something to be taken for granted, in this era. It's not easy out there. If you have opportunities, I really want to take as much advantage of that as I can.

***Thunderbolts** was a multi-character ensemble piece. Did you learn things on that that you'll be applying on *X-Men*?**
I think, generally, yes. There are so many things that I didn't know about before I started that. The biggest learning curve for me was the proportion of the action to the more emotional, character-driven scenes, and how, even though it's more shooting days than I've ever had, they get eaten up quite quickly by the action stuff. By the time we got to the end of it, it felt like, "Oh, now I feel like we get how to do this a little bit better." And, look, who gets to do that? We're in the middle of nowhere in Utah, in a gorgeous location, owning a road, and filming in 100-degree heat, or finding yourself on the second-tallest building in the world. These are very special experiences.

Finally, I have to ask about living with Jon Watts. Who was the messiest?
Good question. In college, we were both pretty messy. By 2012, we had kind of gotten our act together. We were with director friends in an austere modernist house in Mount Washington, and we tried to take very good care of it. But it was hard because we couldn't get any food up the hill. You'd be driving home late at night, and stop at the Jack In The Box on the way up. We didn't eat well in that house.

***THUNDERBOLTS** IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+*

STORY OF THE SHOT

Four Weddings And A Funeral

STOP ALL THE CLOCKS

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE ORIGIN

"The first time I read it," says Mike Newell of Richard Curtis' screenplay for *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, "it was a very original piece of work." Right down to the title, a Ronseal-style device that let the audience know what they were in for. Namely, a film that tracked the adventures of a group of friends through (yes!) four weddings and a funeral. "I was absurdly opposed to the title," says Newell now, shaking his head with the benefit of hindsight. "I said, 'I don't like it because I think the audience will count.' And if they're not having a good time, they'll say, 'Oh God, the funeral is coming.'"

Nobody has a good time at *Four Weddings*' funeral, that's true. But it's still one of the most memorable scenes in a film full of them, as John Hannah's Matthew gives a speech in honour of his dead lover, Simon Callow's Gareth. But it's not all his own work. The speech ends with an almost unbearably moving reading of W.H. Auden's poem, *Funeral Blues*. "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone..." it begins. "I'd never read it," admits Newell. "Because I was a literary snob. But there was a tremendous dam of emotion that lay just behind that poem."

THE SHOOT

Four Weddings' budget and schedule did not reflect the success it would go on to have. Newell, his crew, principal cast and a host of extras (who provided their own funeral garb to save on the costume budget) crowded into St. Clement's Church near Thurrock. "We got this very eccentric location, this little Victorian church that was literally over the fence from an oil refinery," says Newell, who wanted the funeral to be devoid of all the joy that suffuses the rest of the film. "I couldn't believe my luck."

The director, now in his eighties, is keen to give Hannah the credit for the delivery of the poem. "If I said anything to him, and I doubt I did, I would have said, 'The words are very good, John. See what you make of it all on your own.'" Newell doesn't remember how many takes it took, but thinks it can't have been many, as "on that day, we had to shoot three major scenes". In other words, they couldn't stop all the clocks. "The good thing about the poem was, everybody

Alamy, Getty Images, Searchlight

was standing still," adds Newell, "so the camera couldn't really be called upon to do anything complicated."

THE LEGACY

"I was immensely surprised, open-mouthed and utterly delighted by its success," says Newell of *Four Weddings*' reception, which turned Hugh Grant into a megastar. But it also put Hannah, who at that point was a relative unknown, firmly on the map. Auden, who wrote the poem in 1938, wasn't around to see the impact the film had on the public's knowledge and appreciation of his works, but it was profound. A collection of his poems, released soon after *Four Weddings*, sold over a quarter of a million copies, while *Funeral Blues* was once voted the nation's fifth-most-popular modern poem. Newell never asked Curtis why he chose *Funeral Blues*, but it was an inspired selection. Imagine if he'd plumped for 'Mr. Mistoffelees' from *Cats* instead...

***FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Four Weddings And A Funeral made $260 million at the worldwide box office, making it briefly the most successful British film of all time.

2

Before Andie MacDowell was cast as Carrie, Jeanne Tripplehorn had the role, but had to drop out before filming began.

3

Filming took just over a month, in the summer of 1993.

4

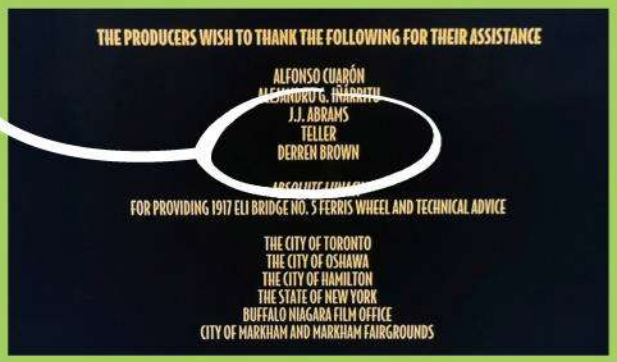
Wet Wet Wet's version of 'Love Is All Around', recorded for the film, was number one in the UK for 15 weeks.

Main: *Four Weddings*' Matthew (John Hannah). **Right:** Derren Brown and Teller.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

DERREN BROWN & TELLER

GUILLERMO DEL TORO ON HOW THEY PUT THE MAGIC INTO *NIGHTMARE ALLEY*


THE PRODUCERS WISH TO THANK THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE
ALFONSO CUARÓN
J.J. ABRAMS
TELLER
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FOR PROVIDING 1917 ELI BRIDGE NO. 5 FERRIS WHEEL AND TECHNICAL ADVICE
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CITY OF MARKHAM AND MARKHAM FAIRGROUNDS

THE SPECIAL-THANKS section of the credits for Guillermo del Toro's 2021 noir thriller *Nightmare Alley* is business as usual, until it isn't. The first two names we see are Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, the Mexican directors who, along with del Toro, are the self-styled Three Amigos of cinema. No surprises there, then.

But things soon get interesting, with the inclusion of Derren Brown, the British illusionist, and Teller. Yes, that Teller, one half of Penn & Teller, the greatest magic duo since Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee. What gives, Guillermo? "They helped me with the mentalism," he says. *Nightmare Alley* is, of course, about a con man named Stanton Carlisle (Bradley Cooper) whose mentalism act propels him all the way to the top. "There are basically three or four tricks in mentalism that get more and more sophisticated with technology and body language and NLP, neuro-linguistic programming," explains del Toro. "But ultimately they are the same four tricks since the carny days."

To glean insight into those tricks (we'd tell you what they were, but then we'd have to kill you), del Toro had dinner with Brown in New York ("He was very kind to talk to Bradley Cooper at length"). Teller, of course, never says a word in his performances alongside the effortlessly gregarious Penn Jillette, but off-stage he speaks ten to the dozen. "I visited him in Vegas," says del Toro, "and he put me in contact with magician consultants in Canada, and recommended three or four books on mentalism. We had a very nice chat about it. I consider him a very dear acquaintance."

Further evidence of their impact on the movie can be found in a brand-new black-and-white director's cut of the movie (available only in the States, for now, on the Criterion Collection), which, according to the director, "has 17 minutes more, but it flows ten times better than the colour [version]", including a new scene of Cooper mentalism. Now that's magic. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***NIGHTMARE ALLEY* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**

The bloody beginning

FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES DIRECTORS ZACH LIPOVSKY AND ADAM B. STEIN ON THAT BRAVURA OPENING SEQUENCE

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IT IS THE fate of all *Final Destination* movies that, no matter how inventive their Rube Goldbergian kills are, they are defined by their opening accident, the sequence in which a major character has a visceral vision of imminent, looming, bloody disaster. Be it a plane crash, a rollercoaster malfunction, or a bridge collapse, *Final Destination* movies start with a bang.

So, when Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein bagged the gig to direct *Final Destination Bloodlines*, the first movie in the franchise for over a decade, they knew that they had to go big, or go home. "We were very focused on making the opening premonition as epic and gloriously gory and spectacular as we could," Stein tells *Empire*. And they delivered a deadly doozy. *Bloodlines* became the biggest *Final Destination* movie at the box office, by some distance, and while the rest of the film is packed with devilish deaths (three letters: MRI...), a large portion of the credit for that has to go to the opening disaster sequence, in which a rooftop restaurant collapses. It sits proudly alongside *Final Destination 2*'s freeway FUBAR as the franchise's finest.

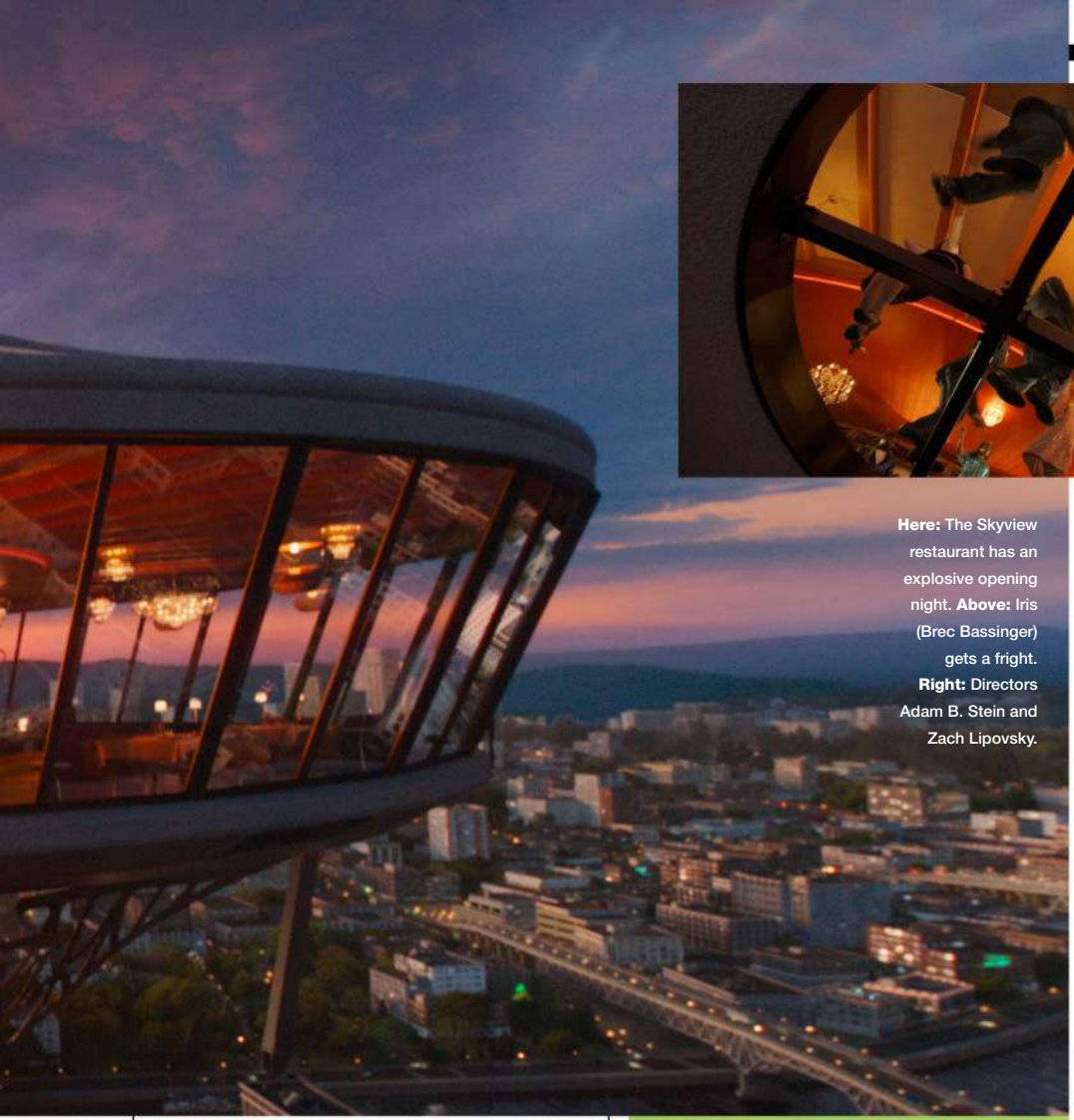
But it was very different when they came on board. Said opening sequence — which, in a first for the series, was going to take place decades before the rest of the film — was initially set on a steam boat in the '50s. "We thought that maybe kids today might not be very familiar with that kind of boat," says Stein. "And we were just going to end up doing a low-budget version of *Titanic*."

Partially inspired by Stein's own fear of heights, they (working with writers Guy Busick and Lori Evans Taylor, and producers Craig Perry and Jon Watts) jumped a decade ahead and switched to a rooftop restaurant, the kind that were all the rage in the '60s. It's there that we meet Iris (Brec Bassinger), who's taken to the opening night of the Skyview by her boyfriend Paul (Max Lloyd-Jones). Who quickly becomes her fiancé, Paul, and even more quickly her dead fiancé, Paul. Because, as is its wont in this series, Death has also come to party. By the time Iris' vision is over, almost everyone in the restaurant will have been crushed, burned, or bludgeoned to a bloody pulp, or fallen to their doom via a collapsing glass floor. To quote one of the great horror-movie taglines, the lucky ones die first.

Lipovsky and Stein say they approached the sequence almost as its own short film (it's the longest *Final Destination* intro of them all), with the shoot taking up almost half of the film's 45-day schedule. It's not hard to see why it took so long, as it builds slowly at first, before unleashing the carnage in a five-minute frenzy of violence. First, as the glass floor, on which Paul and sundry other diners are dancing to a band playing 'Shout', gives way. "We wanted people jumping up and down in unison," says Stein of the choice of song. "And we liked the 'softer now, louder now'. It had this suspenseful anticipation."

Then, fire is introduced into the equation, spreading quickly through the venue. Many

Right: Veteran stuntwoman Yvette Ferguson is all fired up.



Here: The Skyview restaurant has an explosive opening night. **Above:** Iris (Brec Bassinger) gets a fright. **Right:** Directors Adam B. Stein and Zach Lipovsky.

directors would have embraced CG flames. Not Lipovsky and Stein. They did it the old-fashioned way, by setting Yvette Ferguson, a 71-year-old stuntwoman, alight. "Not only did she get lit on fire and run, like, 70 feet," laughs Lipovsky, "she runs into an actual propane leak. They were pumping propane into the set so that we could get the set exploding in flames around her. There were 30 firefighters standing there with hoses ready."

After that, the shit truly hits the fan. Or, to coin a phrase that is almost certain to prove less popular, the piano hits the kid. As in, an extraordinarily unlikeable little twerp (Noah Bromley), who inadvertently kicks off the Skyview snafu by throwing a penny off a balcony, thus gumming up its works. That kid, quickly established as an unadulterated villain who would be twirling a moustache if he were old enough to grow one, is unceremoniously flattened by a piano that has fallen from the building. "We really wanted people to think he's going to get away," says Lipovsky. "Because, of course, you're never going to kill a 12-year-old boy! But people really lose their minds when they see that piano fall."

There is a fair amount of CGI in the sequence. But the duo also insisted on doing as much practically as possible. For that moment, a real piano was dropped (albeit not on a real boy). The sequence was painstakingly shot on no fewer than six different sets, some of which could tilt to a 30-degree angle. "The main set was the 100-foot-diameter restaurant, surrounded by a Volume wall that provided the view," says Stein. Although an impressive build, money was tight. So tight, in fact, that when the scene called for a moving elevator, the directors simply had the actors pretend to come to a halt to simulate movement.

Top to bottom: Ferguson's big burny moment; Iris sees the horror; Death will have its way.

But when it came to gore, more was more. "We added more gore after testing," admits Lipovsky, who found inspiration in an unlikely source: J.A. Bayona's *Society Of The Snow*. "They have incredible shots of people's ankles getting ripped open as the plane's crashing. So when we were doing reshoots, we shot that extra insert of the woman's ankle breaking."

But if there's a moment in the sequence designed for maximum ick, it's the moment when Iris finds herself hanging from the building, with all that stands between her and a perilous plummet to certain death being her engagement ring, which has caught between two rivets. But, agonisingly, it pops off, taking the skin of Iris' finger (actually an animatronic hand) with it. Well, you can't spell "deglove" without "love". "That's actually something we shot two ways," says Stein. "A studio exec thought that might be too much." In the end, common sense prevailed.

The reaction to the sequence has been, as with the film itself, extremely positive. "I think it was a bit surprising, the level to which it went outside of the genre crowd," says Lipovsky, who spent the opening weekend going around movie theatres with Stein, gauging reaction. One moment hit big consistently. "It's always the penny kid getting crushed by the falling piano," he laughs.

As for Stein's fear of heights, did working on this sequence serve as a turning point? "It was a bit cathartic," he says, "but I was in Tokyo with my family recently, and was like, 'Why am I on this glass floor?'" Good question. Best give it a swerve. After all, you can never be too careful up there.

***FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

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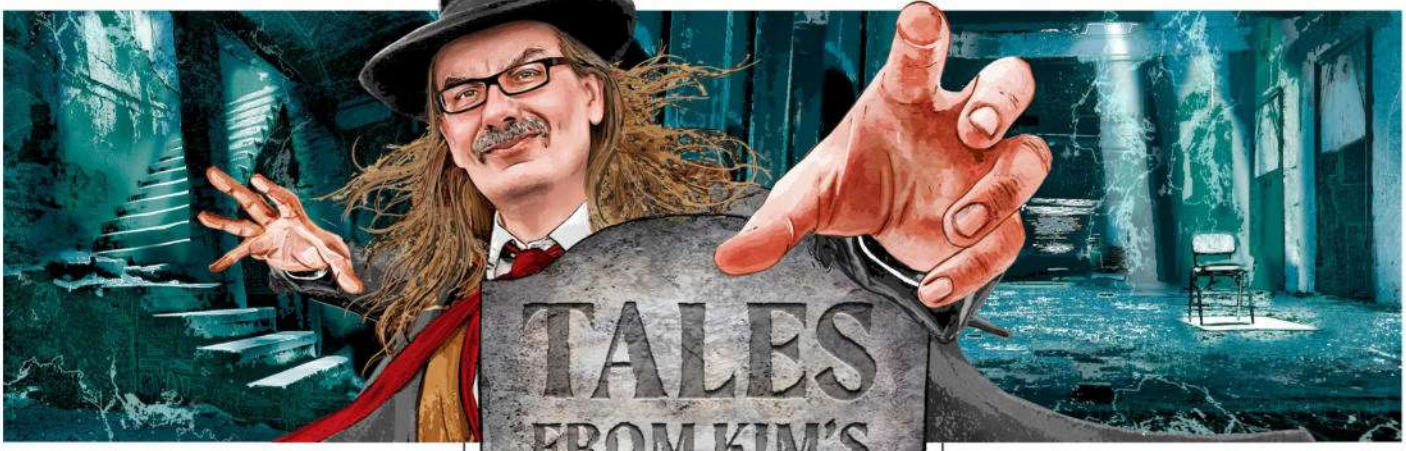


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

THE ACT OF SEEING

I'M A VETERAN of challenging evenings in cinemas. The most extreme was a bill of two major experimental films I saw at the University Of Sussex Film Society in 1978. I haven't seen either since — read on, and you'll understand why — but recall them in detail. I believe they're both essential viewing and cautiously recommend them to anyone with a serious interest in film. Your mileage may vary. User reviews on the IMDb offer a range of incredulous, appalled and just-plain-ticked-off alternate responses.

Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Stan Brakhage's *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971) run 45 and 31 minutes respectively. Yet they can both completely change your understanding of cinema — and even life and death. After *Wavelength*, you won't relate to movies the way you did before. After *The Act...*, you won't view your own body or anyone else's as you did. Now conceive of the kind of mind — belonging to film programmer Alan Fair — it takes to screen these films back to back *on the same programme*. I still remember the walk-outs and the shell-shocked folk who made it all the way through.

"The act of seeing with one's own eyes" — among the most resonant titles in cinema history — is a literal translation of the word "autopsy". Underground filmmaker Brakhage, known for abstract work like the *Dog Star Man* cycle, simply filmed several dissections in the Pittsburgh morgue and edited them together without comment. Recognisable, deceased people are rendered abstract by deconstruction. At first, you might think of a Francis Bacon painting or a horror film (Pittsburgh-based George A. Romero's *Day Of The Dead*?), but those artworks depend on discerning the remnants of humanity in mutilated corpses. Brakhage calmly observes as bodies simply become ingredients. Yes, it's profoundly upsetting — but after the trauma, it's hypnotic and thought-provoking. This is all of us.

Snow's film — set entirely inside a large loft apartment — has intrigue, a mysterious death and 'Strawberry Fields Forever' on the soundtrack, but plot elements are incidental to its technique... a series of three-minute zooms which take us from a wide view of the whole room to a close-up which probes a photograph taped to the far wall. It's a cosmic voyage, made in the era of trip films, set in a single flat, and slow enough to force you to ponder — or fall asleep, which plenty of viewers do — how film presents space, time and story. It's fascinating, but — as the critic Philip Strick said — there's a point mid-way through where boredom becomes an integral part of its strategy.

It's said that no filmmaker wants to be boring. Brakhage and Snow — like Alan Clarke in the similarly divisive *Elephant* (1989), which makes a parade of murders dull and then forces you to examine how you've been desensitised to routine violence — understand that giving viewers time (and space) to think about what they're seeing (with their own eyes) is one way to transcendence.

And I'm still not ready to watch them again.

Top to bottom: Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967); Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989).

MUBI

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

AFRAID
(DIGITAL)

This Blumhouse *Frankenstein* variant is up to the minute in details (AI, deepfakes etc) but its story is from *2001* (evil computer takes over). John Cho and Katherine Waterston beta-test digital household assistant AIA, who goes from indispensable helper to megalomania in a week. Entertaining if obvious.

BLOODY AXE WOUND
(DIGITAL)

Ageing slasher Billy Burke passes the axe to werewolf-masked daughter Sari Arambulo. Initially enthusiastic, she gets to know her prospective high-school victims and has qualms about mass murder. This is as messy as its title but has attitude, performances and good (and bad) jokes going for it.

CLEANER
(DIGITAL)

Daisy Ridley hangs off a London skyscraper dodging bullets in a mash-up of *Die Hard* and *Confessions Of A Window Cleaner*. Ecoterrorists threaten a power-company shareholders' shindig. Special Forces Daisy fights back. Ludicrous nonsense, directed with muscle by Martin Campbell.

MARGAUX
(DIGITAL)

Bonus points for combining *three* currently overworked horror trends: evil AI, evil Airbnb and influencers who deserve to die. Margaux the smart home seduces then torments four superficial student hotties. Features, among others, Dr Octopus arms, 3D-printed weed/SM gear, and okay kills.

THE PARENTING
(DIGITAL)

A gay *Meet The Parents* farce set in a haunted Airbnb, this has basic work from lead couple Nik Dodani and Brandon Flynn but quality acting from Brian Cox, Edie Falco, Lisa Kudrow and Dean Norris as possessed or poltergeisted parents. Worth it for Falco's robot dance.

Time Capsule

Guy Pearce

THE AUSSIE ACTOR AMBLES DOWN MEMORY LANE

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

GUY PEARCE IS feeling a little nervous. We're talking on Zoom — *Empire* in London, Pearce in the recording studio he's built at his Amsterdam home — and we're about to open the Time Capsule, sharing the pics we've curated from his 30-year career. "I've done a few decent things along the way," he laughs. "But a few dodgy ones as well. So hopefully you won't have picked any of the dodgy ones." Heaven forfend. In fact, there's a whole host of gems for the 57-year-old Australian to reminisce about. Sadly, Bouncer the dog will have to wait until next time...

MEMORY LANE
MEMENTO (2000)

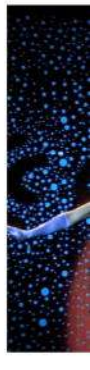
"I watched *Memento* recently in London, which was a little disturbing for me, because I realised I wasn't very happy with my performance. But I remember these moments, working with the wonderful Carrie-Anne [Moss]. There's something kind of sexual about this. She's pulling my shirt off there, so there's something psychologically kind of fucked-up. And looking at myself in that photograph, you can see that Leonard is looking at this tattoo and seeing it for the first time, in a way. That was quite a fascinating thing to play. I could treat everything like it was a separate little sketch."

COFFEE BREAK
THE BRUTALIST (2024)

"We'd shot in Hungary and then we got to Italy to go to the marble quarries in Carrara. And you know what Italy's like: there's beauty everywhere. So sitting down and getting to enjoy the beauty, and yet having to play this impatient moment, was a great contrast. We were down the hill from the quarries, and I was staying in a hotel diagonally across the road. We were only there for, like, three days. Funnily enough, the quarry we used, apparently the guy who owns it is a friend of Adrien's [Brody]. That's how we got to go so deep."

ON THE OUTSIDE
INSIDE (2025)

"Warren (*a prisoner on day release*) is enjoying his freedom, to a degree, but it's just so complicated for him. He doesn't know how to be a free man out in the outside world, so this picture brings complex feelings. He's trying to enjoy the freedom, but he's hanging on to that car he's in as well. Car scenes are always tricky, unless the director's in there with you, because you're getting instructions over a radio, there's always a lot of information, there's the noise of the car. When you've got your head out of a car window, you can miss stuff."



Alamy, Getty Images

IRON MONOLOGUE
IRON MAN 3 (2013)

"I love this movie, and I remember this scene very vividly. This was pretty much the big chunk of dialogue I had. I've finally caught the man I want to catch [Tony Stark]. And Robert [Downey Jr], who I adore, and who's an absolute genius, has this real habit every day of putting a big line through the script and giving everyone a pen and saying, 'Right, what are we going to say today?' Which is all well and good if you're brilliant, like Robert. But I'm not, and I need to learn my lines. So I had this scene in the back of my head for weeks and weeks and weeks. We had a meeting beforehand, literally the night before, and I managed to stick to my guns and keep a lot of what I'd already learned."

FREE AS A BIRD
THE ADVENTURES OF PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT (1994)

"I was dance captain for Terence [Stamp] and Hugo [Weaving], only because I'd done some musicals before, and the other two hadn't. So I was in charge of remembering the dance steps, and having to remind the pair of them if anything was forgotten. The tricky thing about this was trying to balance that massive emu head. It was about four feet tall, and it's trying to tip off, so we had a bit of work to do in just keeping that thing on our heads, as well as doing the dance steps, lip-synching, and looking like real drag queens."

WORST BUDS
L.A. CONFIDENTIAL (1997)

"I remember this moment. There was real hatred between the two characters (*Pearce's Ed Exley and Russell Crowe's Bud White*) by this point. Bud is really being powerful, and Ed is trying to cut through with his intellect, but doing things wrong, like this moment here. We were filming this out in the street, and I'm trying to interrogate a rape victim in the back of an ambulance, and he's just saying, 'Get the fuck away from her.' I just think Russell is such a powerful actor. I worked with him on *Neighbours*, funnily enough, years beforehand. And even there I was like, 'Who's this guy?' We've stayed great mates ever since."

THE HURT LOCKER
THE PROPOSITION (2005)

"This brings up memories. The film that has affected me more than any other film, ever, is *The Elephant Man*. So to get to meet and work with John [Hurt] was a real thrill. I told him what that film meant to me, and he said, 'Oh, fuck off! I don't want to talk about that film!' Note to self: don't idolise anybody, because it doesn't work. But I think *The Proposition* is one of the greatest films ever made, and it's a real honour to be part of it. And I just have a quiet chuckle to myself when I see me and John together, because of that story."

THE BIG SHORTS
THE ROVER (2014)

"The first thing that comes to mind here is just how good Rob Pattinson was in the film. Him playing the vulnerability that he played fully enabled me to play the kind of dog I was in the movie. I remember, before we started, David [Michôd, director] said to me, 'I really want the character to wear shorts, but the producers don't want that. So I need to get you into shorts so we can look at your legs.' So we basically had to audition my legs, standing there in front of the producers with shorts on. Clearly, I had decent-enough legs!"

INSIDE IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL

SPOILER SPECIAL

Heads Of State

ILYA NAISHULLER ON HIS RIOTOUS ACTION-COMEDY

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

ILYA NAISHULLER — the somebody who made *Nobody* — is carving out quite the reputation as a director of high-concept hijinks that blend absurd comedy with wild action sequences. Case in point: his latest, *Heads Of State*, in which John Cena's US President and Idris Elba's British Prime Minister find themselves on the run. Here, Naishuller unpicks the movie's key moments.

KILLER TOMATOES

It's a bold move for any filmmaker to start off by reminding critics of tomatoes. Thankfully, the ones on display in the opening sequence of *Heads Of State* are far from rotten, as Naishuller marshals the mayhem going on at La Tomatina, an actual tomato-throwing festival that takes place every year in Buñol, Spain, as Priyanka Chopra Jonas' team of superspies are picked off by assassins. "It's PG-13, so I'm going to set it in that tomato festival, and cover up all the blood," says Naishuller. "It'll still feel a little violent, but I can get away with it." In the end, the production didn't shoot in Buñol, but the South of France, and they used mostly CG tomatoes. Explains why they weren't rotten.

NOT MUCH COPLEY

The first member of Chopra Jonas' team to bite the bullet is Coop, a tech guy played by Naishuller's old *Hardcore Henry* star, Sharlto Copley. Naishuller intended to play that part himself, but the realities of filming meant he had to reluctantly give up the role, and call his chum. "We're lucky that he was available," admits Naishuller. "It's a favour from a very good friend, a very talented man." In the end, the cameo pays dividends, as bumping off a recognisable face early doors has its advantages. "It's Emilio Estevez's death in *Mission: Impossible*," says Naishuller. "I never forgot that."

GET OFF MY PLANE

After a couple of awkward chalk-and-cheese meetings between Idris Elba's no-nonsense British PM, Sam Clarke, and John Cena's 78 per cent-nonsense movie-star-turned-President, Will Derringer, Naishuller gets the two together on Air Force One, and then kicks the film into high gear by having terrorists bring the plane down. Interestingly, it's not a sequence played for laughs, as our heroes scramble desperately to stay alive. "The key was, our guys are not heroes," says Naishuller. "Our guys are terrified. I want it to be terrifying." The director reveals that it took five-and-a-half months to storyboard the sequence. "There were 12 versions, completely different, with fighter jets, an escape pod, and parkour."

COMETH THE HOUR, COMER THE MAN

Derringer and Clarke find themselves in a Polish safehouse, where they meet Jack Quaid's Marty Comer, an enthusiastic young agent who quickly justifies his description as "America's nutter" by defending the safe house from a small army of goons. It's one of the film's standout sequences and, again, is notable for Cena and Elba taking a backseat. "The guys let him steal the show," says Naishuller. "A lot of movie stars would be like, 'He's doing the action. What do we do? We're watching him do the action!'" A wise move — Naishuller says that Quaid broke a rib filming the last shot of the sequence, after running full pelt into a chair. Elba and Cena were unscathed. Smart fellas.

COMEBACK QUEEN

About an hour after we last saw her being gunned down in Spain, Chopra Jonas' Noel (who just happens to be Sam's former lover) returns to save the two hapless heads of state. In a wonderful quick-fire montage, we see how Noel managed to get from Spain to Poland, stopping for a quick fight at Oktoberfest along the way. For some reason. "You know what the reason is?" laughs Naishuller. "Entertainment. I pitched that, and the writers were like, 'Ilya, have you gone mad?' I'm like, 'No, because it's so stupid, we're gonna get away with it!'" He wasn't wrong. Oh, and it's here where Naishuller got his cameo, as a Polish cop.

WATER SHOWDOWN

Flash-forward to the finale, and Derringer and Clarke — who have long since established their own action-hero credentials — are facing off against Paddy Considine's evil arms-dealer. And it's here where Clarke, who throughout the movie has claimed never to have seen any of Derringer's action flicks, reveals himself to be a closet fanboy by suggesting they pull off a signature move from Derringer's 'Water Cobra 2'. Interestingly, Naishuller doesn't show us this earlier in the film, when we see a couple of clips from Derringer's movies. "It's not about that," he says. "It's not about copying a move that we saw in the opening of the movie. It's about what the scene is really about — these guys are on the same page. It's a cementing of their bromance."

PUB LUNCH

"The original ending was, everybody's at the White House," says Naishuller. "We don't need the White House. It's expensive to build the White House, and why would Idris be there?" But it's less expensive to hire an English pub, which is why the movie ends with Clarke and Derringer having fish and chips at the Morgan Arms in Bow. "The story really starts in England, let's end it in England," argues Naishuller. "I wanted a wholesome feeling." The White House scene would also have had Chopra Jonas in there, but the relocation meant that Naishuller found another way to wrap up her story...

MARTY'S NOT DEAD

The Marty Comer sequence ends with him getting a bullet in the brain. Yet, in a post-credits scene, we see that Marty is alive and well, thanks to a metal plate in his head. "He absolutely died," says Naishuller, who admits that a test screening played its part in bringing Marty back from the dead. "The focus group confirmed that we needed to do it. I had already pitched the idea that Jack lives, and he's on a tropical island in a Hawaiian shirt, surrounded by ladies. And then we tie it in with Priyanka." Because — yes — Noel shows up too. Spin-off ahoy? "If enough people think the movie's good, then we can talk about it." How wonderfully democratic.

HEADS OF STATE **IS ON PRIME VIDEO NOW**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

The Talented Mr. Ripley

ANTHONY MINGHELLA'S JAZZY THRILLER OF DECEPTION

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT it'd be better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody." There is perhaps no better line to sum up the mindset of the protagonist in 1999's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Anthony Minghella's big-screen adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel of the same name. The film sees master impersonator Tom Ripley (played by Matt Damon) mistaken as a Princeston student by shipping mogul H erbert Greenleaf (James Rebhorn), who then pays Ripley to head to Italy and convince his rebellious son Dickie (Jude Law) to return home. Ripley becomes infatuated with Dickie and his luxurious expat lifestyle, and soon finds himself going to extreme lengths to stay a part of it.

In 1997, British writer-director Minghella was riding high after his adaptation of *The English Patient* nabbed nine Oscars, including Best Director and Best Picture. For his next project, he had been asked by Sydney Pollack (wearing his producer hat) to apply the same treatment to *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, but Minghella had one condition: he would not make the film unless he could find the right Ripley. It was a complex role to fill, one that required an actor who could successfully straddle the line between vulnerable and predatory, and keep the audience on side throughout the identity thief's murderous moves. Enter Matt Damon, whose performance as the titular troubled genius in *Good Will Hunting* had caught Minghella's eye.

Damon is a revelation here, subverting his freshly burnished good-guy image to deliver a sinister performance the likes of which we haven't seen from him since. His Ripley is charming and bumbling at times, but always imbued with a voyeuristic edge. Damon's crooked mega-watt smile, baby blues, floppy bright-blond hair and eager-to-please demeanour make him sympathetic, making it all the more alarming when he flips the switch, descending into violence and manipulation. Damon's subtle posture changes indicate Ripley assuming different identities — the slight hunch of insecurity straightening into confident swagger, his voice modulating from nervous chatter to cultured sophistication. From the first minute of the movie, we are learning only about Dickie, about his exploits and personality. There is no time given to Ripley's backstory, no effort to understand what made him into who he is other than a glimpse at a lonely life in a dingy New York apartment. He exists only as a vessel to take on the lives of others; a shapeshifter.

A Ripley like that requires a Dickie powerful enough to warrant his obsession. Minghella found him while watching 1998's *The Wisdom Of Crocodiles*, also known as *Immortality*, a vampire romance flick produced by his wife Carolyn Choa, and starring a handsome British actor called Jude Law. Dichotomy, again, was what Minghella was after, and Law had the ability to exude golden-boy magnetism as well as the potential for darkness and cruelty — plus, as the director said in a behind-the-scenes featurette, he believed an English actor would have "much greater facility" to approach the kind of class privilege at play with Dickie than an American counterpart. The combination worked: Law and Damon are electric together, their dynamic constantly evolving and thrumming with homo-eroticism, culminating in that iconic oar-clobbering out at sea.

Marge, Dickie's girlfriend and the only person suspicious of Tom Ripley by the end of the film, was much easier to find. In fact, Gwyneth Paltrow was the first actor that Minghella cast, coming off the back of her Oscar win for *Shakespeare In Love*. Throw in Cate Blanchett channelling old-school Hollywood glamour as textiles heiress Meredith Logue and Philip Seymour Hoffman on dastardly form as Dickie's intimidating friend Freddie Miles, and you've got a star-studded cast for the ages, all operating at the height of their powers.

There is one more key character in the film — Italy itself, the backdrop to Dickie's opulent lifestyle and Ripley's devious crimes. The movie shot on location in Italy for 90 days across Venice, Rome and various coastal towns, taking the country back to the late 1950s in among the hustle and bustle of tourists and locals. Challenging and chaotic as it was, due to Italian bureaucracy, crowds of onlookers and setting up shots in centuries-old buildings, the result is astounding; we feel as if we are transported to the sunny beaches and cobbled streets of the Mediterranean from the second Ripley spies

Left: Ripley (Matt Damon) has his eye on Dickie (Jude Law). **Below, top to bottom:** Smooth criminal; Gwyneth Paltrow as wary Marge; Jazz japes.

Dickie and Marge frolicking in the ocean.

Music, too, is a crucial part of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*'s potent cocktail, by French-Lebanese composer Gabriel Yared. A classical pianist himself, Ripley studies jazz when he learns Dickie loves it, and their supposed shared appreciation becomes *the* thing that encourages Dickie to keep Ripley around. In fact, Ripley's actions as the film goes on, as his subterfuge threatens to spiral out of control, is jazz-like: he's improvising wildly, from one incident to another. Both Law and Damon learned their respective instruments, and are actually playing during musical sequences — the standout of which is their contagiously energetic performance of 'Tu Vuò Fà L'Americano' in an underground jazz club.

Minghella's wasn't the first (or the last) screen depiction of Highsmith's Ripley tales — there was the French film *Plein Soleil* (aka *Purple Noon*) in 1960, which starred Alain Delon as the enigmatic lead, followed by Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* in 1977, based on novel *Ripley's Game*, with Dennis Hopper taking up the con-man mantle. Most recently, there was last year's black-and-white Netflix series fronted by Andrew Scott. It is, however, the one that has made the most cultural impact. Its sophisticated approach to the unreliable narrator is echoed in films like *Gone Girl* and *Nightcrawler*. Its sun-soaked beauty and fluid sexuality bring Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* to mind. Its portrayal of wealthy Americans abroad, and privilege, desire and moral decay against such gorgeous landscapes feels like the blueprint for the hit HBO show *The White Lotus*. And, although Emerald Fennell has said it wasn't a specific reference point for her 2023 Barry Keoghan-starring internet-virality machine *Saltburn*, the similarities in their explorations of identity, desire and a desperation for social mobility are undeniable. In creating one of cinema's most iconic psychopaths, Minghella didn't just adapt a novel — he built a template for the psychological thriller that resonates to this day. Now *that's* talent.

***THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Alamy

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND

OUT **NOW / DIGITAL**

My film of the year thus far (and we're running out of pretenders to the throne) sees Tim Key's eccentric recluse try to reunite a long-split folk duo (Tom Basden and Carey Mulligan) on an island so remote that there's nothing to do but play music, argue and reflect on the wreckage of the past. Basden and Key's screenplay, beautifully directed by James Griffiths, is pitch-perfect in its blend of character-driven humour, pathos and quirk. Warm, witty, wonderful.

2 HAPPY GILMORE 2

OUT **NOW / NETFLIX**

Adam Sandler's rage-fuelled golfer returns after three decades away, older but absolutely not wiser, in a cameo-crammed sequel that takes some absolutely wild storytelling swings. Thankfully, though, it delivers on the laughs, particularly when it gives in to its nuttier inclinations, including a deranged Benny Safdie as an uncut gem of a villain.

3 MICHAEL HANEKE: A CURZON COLLECTION

OUT **SEPTEMBER 15 / BLU-RAY**

This box set brings together the complete works of the Austrian director whose nickname could well be Unhappy Gilmore. There's no golf (although golf clubs are used inventively in both versions of *Funny Games*), just extraordinary, clear-eyed examinations of pretty much every facet of the human condition, in classics from *Hidden* to *The White Ribbon*. Happy trails.

4 THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME

OUT **SEPTEMBER 1 / DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL**

Yes, Wes Anderson has made his film again, and yes, it may not be quite as good as the last time Wes Anderson made his film again, but I'm just happy that we live in a time where a filmmaker this singular can attract big budgets and bigger names to carve out worlds unlike anything anyone else is doing. Long may Wes Anderson continue to make his film.

The Ranking

MCU TV shows

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS ON THE BEST (AND WORST) OF MARVEL ON THE BOX

Marco Vittur

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
Blames the Skrulls for *Secret Invasion*.

HELEN O'HARA
Would give anything to see 'Rogers: The Musical'.

JAMES DYER
Thinks Lou Ferrigno is still the definitive Hulk.

AMON WARMANN
Can't tell the difference between his waking life and dreams.

Chris: So, *Ironheart* has just finished its run on Disney+. Which means that we're now at the point where there are enough MCU TV shows to comfortably Rank. What do we think of the overall quality?
Amon: There are maybe three to four shows I put in the four-star-and-above range, and there's a whole lot of mid.
James: Don't get me wrong, I had a good time with most, but it's like, "Welcome to the kingdom of three stars."
Helen: It's been up and down. The best of them convinced us that not only did we want to watch them, but we actually cared more about those characters than the leads of the films where they'd been introduced. The worst have absolutely squandered potential.
Chris: I think there's actually a lot of four-star shows, but also *Secret Invasion*, which is genuinely the worst thing that Marvel Studios has ever attached its name to. The Netflix shows started well, but felt and looked the same. The Disney+ shows all look and feel different. *WandaVision* does not feel like *Ms. Marvel*, which does not feel like *Moon Knight*.
James: *WandaVision* is genius. It's so perfectly suited to the medium, by looking at the history and legacy of television shows.
Helen: It was a magnificent start. The first four or five episodes were so exciting and inventive and funny that it maybe spoiled us for a lot of what came after, including the second half of *WandaVision*.
Amon: It was a big swing. No other MCU show has really sparked the discourse the way that show did.
Chris: It was so daring. There was that episode that ended with Wanda and Vision having an argument, and Wanda starts rolling the credits on the show, but they just keep arguing over them. And it was very quickly followed by *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*.
James: It felt like a Marvel movie. It felt like it had the budget of a film. And then the rest of the series happened.
Chris: They'd spent all the money by then.
Helen: They did have to rewrite on the fly due to the pandemic. But it didn't do the characters justice. They somehow managed to under-serve Bucky and Sam.
Chris: It came out in 2021, back when the MCU felt bulletproof. And when that show tailed off, it felt like the first sign of vulnerability. Luckily, *Loki* came along a few months later and put some gas back into the balloon.
Helen: It's a show that is rooted in Loki's psychology, his history, his past, present and future, all colliding. I have issues with the pacing, especially in the second season. But where it gets to still blows my mind.
Chris: It's the hardest sci-fi show in the MCU canon. Visually really impressive, and it plays with wild concepts of time and space. It's the show *Doctor Who* wants to be.
Amon: I remember not being hyped, because we'd had so much Loki. What more can you do with him? I was very wrong. The ending is incredible.
Chris: There were four live-action shows that year. They were like London buses. And *Hawkeye* was the last. I think it gets forgotten when people talk about great MCU shows.
Amon: I like *Hawkeye*, but I had a few issues with that show. I did not like its use of Kingpin.
James: It had a slightly heightened comedy feel to it. Kingpin doesn't fit that tone.
Chris: The chemistry between Jeremy Renner and Hailee Steinfeld was ace, though. Shame we haven't really seen Kate Bishop since. Same with one of the most loveable characters in the MCU, Oscar Isaac's Steven Grant from *Moon Knight*.
Amon: I like a lot of *Moon Knight*. I like that they actually treated dissociative disorder seriously, and it led to a lot of really interesting, unexpected narrative pathways. But I preferred the more intimate drama to the CG fights of the last couple of episodes.
Chris: Both *Moon Knight* and *Ms. Marvel* started strong, and didn't quite know how to stick the landing. Maybe there's some studio interference, maybe there's a failure of nerve to see a concept through.
Helen: I wonder if there's pressure, or an expectation, that there will be a big, spectacular battle at the end.
Chris: One show that has an incredible ending, though, is *She-Hulk*.
James: When it comes to big

swings, there's really nothing like that. When she climbs out of the icon on the Disney+ interface and goes searching for Kevin Feige, you're like, "What the fuck am I watching?" It's just insanity.

Chris: I love *She-Hulk*. It was so funny, and wild. And that might be it for the great Disney+ shows. *Ironheart* is fine, better than I expected. *Agatha All Along* is fine, if a little disappointing as a *WandaVision* follow-up.

Amon: It gave us another great song in 'The Ballad Of The Witches' Road'.

Chris: *Daredevil: Born Again* is fine, but not a patch on the first seasons of *Daredevil* at Netflix.

James: The Netflix shows are all flawed. But *Daredevil* had an incredibly strong first season. It was an event when it landed. The second season is actually not bad, but it's by far the weakest of the three.

Amon: I would say the first half of Season 2 might actually be the best of *Daredevil*. And then it gets bogged down in ninjas. But I'm glad it's come back in some shape or form.

James: That first season of *Jessica Jones* I thought was equally brilliant. But the second season was just terrible. It fell off a cliff dramatically.

Helen: I really struggle to remember any story arcs from *Iron Fist* or *Luke Cage* or even my beloved *Punisher*. I paid attention, the man is hot, but I could not tell you who the big bad was.

James: It all started to drown in mediocrity. *The Defenders*, while mercifully short, was a hodgepodge mess of tones and ideas that didn't hang together.

Chris: Should we talk about the MCU shows that aren't Netflix or Disney+? Is anyone going to bat for *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, for example?

Amon: I will. I've watched all seven seasons multiple times, and it's really, really good. Especially Season 4, the Ghost Rider season. It's a shame there wasn't a lot of synergy between *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and the MCU, to say the least.

Chris: "Good news is, we're launching a TV show based around S.H.I.E.L.D.. By the way, we're destroying S.H.I.E.L.D. in the movies. Good luck!"

Helen: I quite like *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.*. It was really up and down. But the characters were solid.

Chris: It tailed off very quickly for me. I saw the first season-and-a-half, and then I was like, "Life's too short."

Helen: I preferred *Agent Carter*. The second season was admittedly weaker than the first.

Amon: It introduced James D'Arcy as Jarvis, who popped up in *Avengers: Endgame*.

Chris: And lent his voice to *What If...?*. Let's talk *What If...?*, then. 'What If... We Pretended *Secret Invasion* Never Existed?'

Helen: It's really fun. There's inconsistency by its nature, but I like that they tied it together and did something interesting with it throughout the three seasons.

Amon: It's very much in my top ten. I love that it elevated Agent Carter to main-character status. They utilised Marvel's deep bench far better than any live-action stuff has done.

Chris: It had some absolutely mad individual concepts. 'What If... Doctor Strange Lost His Heart Instead Of His Hands?' is phenomenal.

Amon: That might be my favourite episode in the entire run.

Chris: And 'What If... Happy Hogan Saved Christmas?' is the best *Die Hard* sequel.

James: It's on my list, in spite of being a cartoon. I managed to get over my anti-animation bias because the storytelling is strong.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?

WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:

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THE TOP TEN

1.
WANDAVISION (2021)

2.
LOKI (2021-'23)

3.
DAREDEVIL (2015-'18)

4.
HAWKEYE (2021)

5.
MS. MARVEL (2022)

6.
WHAT IF...? (2021-'24)

7.
SHE-HULK: ATTORNEY AT LAW (2022)

8.
MOON KNIGHT (2022)

9.
JESSICA JONES (2015-'19)

10.
AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. (2013-'20)

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

STEPHEN KING MOVIES

1 What was the name of the very first movie based on a Stephen King novel? It came out in 1976, just two years after the book…

2 Rob Reiner's *Stand By Me* is based on a novella from King's *Different Seasons* collection. What is that novella called?

3 Reiner's production company took its name from the small, fictional Maine town where King sets a lot of his stories. What is its name?

4 Frank Darabont has directed three King adaptations. *The Shawshank Redemption* is a gimme. Name the other two.

5 Which movie star features on the poster that covers the hole Andy Dufresne escapes through (spoiler alert!) in *The Shawshank Redemption*?

6 Only one person has won an Oscar for starring in a King adaptation. Who is it, and for which movie?

7 What is the name of the hotel that appears in *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*?

8 And what is the name of the famous room in which something terrible appears; a room so famous that it lent its name to a documentary about *The Shining*?

9 Pretty easy *Shining* questions, huh. Well, here's a trickier hotel-related one. What is the name of the hotel with the extremely haunted room that John Cusack visits in *1408*?

10 In case it wasn't obvious from our cover, Edgar Wright is adapting a King story with *The Running Man*. Who directed 1987's version?

11 King has directed just one movie, inspired by his short story, 'Trucks'. What's its title?

12 "Sometimes dead is better" is a tagline from which King movie?

13 Jordy Verrill, Minister, Cemetery Caretaker, Shopkeeper. What links these seemingly wildly different roles in *Creepshow*, *Pet Sematary*, *Sleepwalkers*, and *It Chapter Two*?

14 If Jaeden Martell equals James McAvoy, Jack Dylan Grazer equals James Ransone, and Sophia Lillis equals Jessica Chastain, who does Finn Wolfhard equal in *It Chapter Two*?

15 "The sparrows are flying again" is a key line from which George A. Romero-directed Kinger?

16 A young Drew Barrymore starred in two King adaptations. What were they called?

17 One of those movies is an anthology which features a story called 'Quitters, Inc.'. Who stars in that as a man trying to stop smoking?

18 Greg Stillson is the name of a particularly unhinged Presidential candidate in which 1983 movie, the only King ever directed by David Cronenberg?

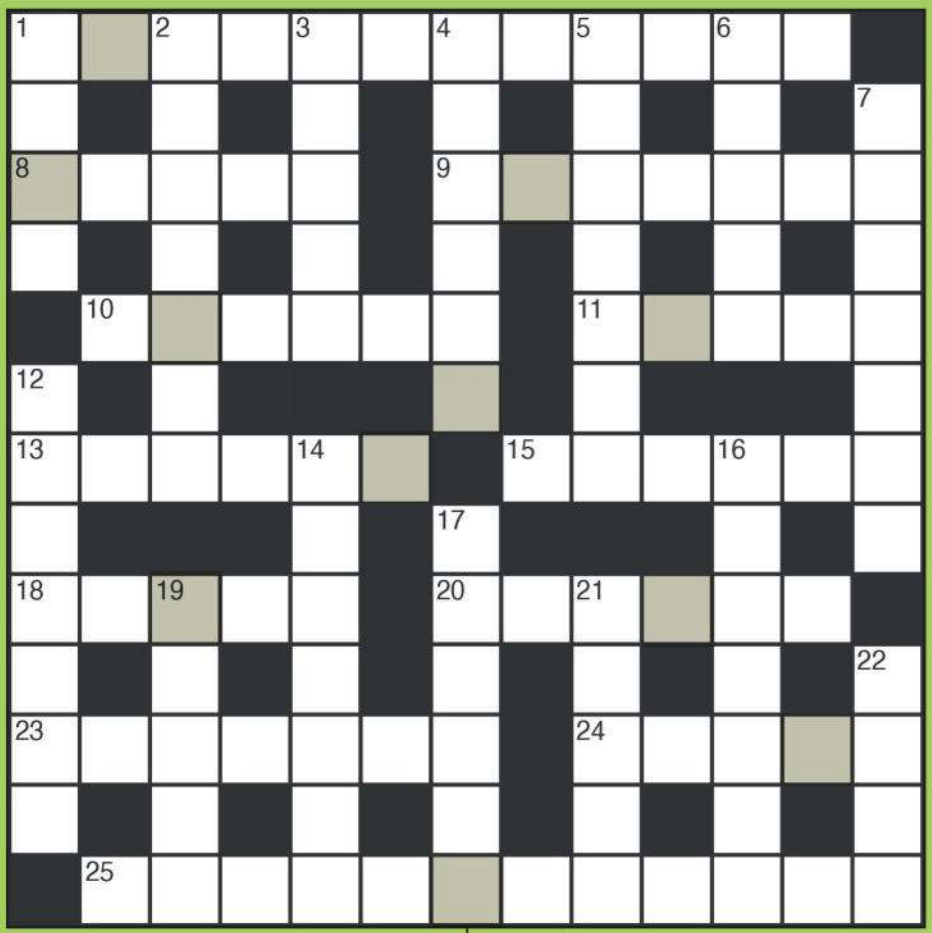
19 1983 also saw John Carpenter direct his one and only King, *Christine*. Can you name the make of the titular killer car? Bonus point if you get the year right too.

20 The great Miguel Ferrer starred as a sleazy journalist on the trail of a vampire in which movie based on a King short story?

ANSWERS **1** Brian De Palma's *Carrie* **2** 'The Body' **3** Castle Rock **4** *The Green Mile* (1999) and *The Mist* (2007) **5** Raquel Welch, in *One Million Years B.C.* **6** Kathy Bates, for *Misery* **7** The Overlook **8** Room 237 **9** The Dolphin **10** Paul Michael Glaser (yes, Starsky himself) **11** *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) **12** *Pet Sematary* (1989) **13** They're all characters played by King himself **14** Bill Hader (they're actors who play younger and older versions of the same characters) **15** *The Dark Half* (1993) **16** *Firestarter* (1984) and *Cat's Eye* (1985) **17** James Woods **18** *The Dead Zone* **19** 1958 Plymouth Fury **20** *The Night Flier* (1997)

Getty Images

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 He appears as Mandrake and Muffley and Strangelove (5,7)
8 Close, but no Oscar yet for this actress after eight nominations (5)
9 She's Audrey Hepburn in a Billy Wilder film (7)
10 Egon Spengler's granddaughter (6)
11 Jeremy Irons, Lindsay Lohan and Michael B. Jordan have all played them (5)
13 Bond villain who can't feel pain (6)
15 "In case I don't see you," he says, "good afternoon, good evening and good night" (6)
18 Harris, who was Guy Ritchie's Moriarty (5)
20 *I'm Thinking Of — Things* (Jessie Buckley film) (6)
23 *The Piano* maker Jane (7)
24 Kevin, producer and ruler of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (5)
25 He took Mitchum's role in Scorsese's *Cape Fear* remake (6,2,4)

DOWN

1 Joanna, Elliot or Regé-Jean (4)
2/14 Down Terrence Malick's return to cinema 20 years after *Days Of Heaven* (3,4,3,4)
3 *Bridget Jones's* Zellweger (5)
4 It's time for Garland and Astaire to parade (6)
5 Colin Farrell's choice of animal in a Yorgos Lanthimos film (7)
6 Sam, whose superhero movies feature Spider-Man and Doctor Strange (5)
7 Rebecca Hall's debut as director (7)
12 *The Florida —* (Sean Baker film) (7)
14 See **2 Down**
16 *Breakfast At Tiffany*'s composer Henry (7)
17 Jean-Pierre, who helmed *Amélie* (6)
19 Action franchise that began with *First Blood* (5)
21 Frequent Wes Anderson and Robert Eggers collaborator Willem (5)
22 Bérénice, speechless star of *The Artist* (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

CRITERION HIDDEN GEMS

THIS MONTH WE have a host of new Criterion Blu-ray/4K releases to give away — all highly lauded, but perhaps not titles you hear about every day. So now's the chance to discover some more leftfield delights. First up is *Mishima: A Life In Four Chapters* (out now), Paul Schrader's 1985 collage-like portrait of the acclaimed Japanese writer. Secondly, *Shoeshine* (out now), Vittorio De Sica's Oscar-winning film of lost innocence in 1940s Italy. Then, *A Confucian Confusion* and *Mahjong* (out now), two sharp satires by Edward Yang, one of Taiwan's most celebrated filmmakers. Next, *Saving Face* (out September 1), Alice Wu's feature debut, a queer romantic-comedy set in vibrant, multicultural New York. And finally Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp* (out September 15), one of Japanese cinema's most intriguing anti-war pieces. We have a bundle for three winners, so crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

AVAILABLE TO BUY AT AMAZON, HMV, RAREWAVES AND ZAVVI

COMPETITION ENDS SEPTEMBER 22

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on September 22. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

SEPTEMBER'S ANSWERS ACROSS: **1** Mia Sara, **5** Dogs, **8** Quint, **9** Garland, **10** Emperor, **12** Twice, **13** Norman, **15** Mystic, **18** Momoa, **19** Ricardo, **21** Maureen, **22** Morel, **24** *Stay*, **25** O'Connor. **1** McQueen, **2** Ari, **3** Aster, **4** Asgard, **5** Dorothy, **6** *Gladiator*, **7** *Edge*, **11** Paramount, **14** Academy, **16** Coogler, **17** Brando, **18** Mimi, **20** Cameo, **23** Ran. **ANAGRAM:** OONA CHAPLIN

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before September 23 or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Three winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk.
For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

Barry Lyndon

CHOSEN BY **JACK LOWDEN**
(ACTOR)

Jack Lowden: "I recently rewatched *Barry Lyndon*. When he leaves on his own, and he's stopped by two highwaymen and is robbed at gunpoint, I find that really funny. It's the slowest robbery, I think, in film. You keep thinking, "You could run, you could run...", but he doesn't. I just adore that film."

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD — DAY

Redmond Barry (Ryan O'Neal) is riding along a country road, bound for Dublin after having killed (or believed to have killed) a rival in a duel. As 'Tin Whistles' strikes up ominously on the soundtrack, Barry sees a man standing in the road, in front of a felled tree. The man's horse waits to the side. Barry slows down, uneasy.

BARRY: Uh, excuse me, sir?

The man whirls around, and points two pistols at Barry. He is also wearing glasses. This is Captain Feeney (Arthur O'Sullivan).

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Good morning again, young sir.

From behind, a younger man rides up, leaving Barry no escape route. He also points a pistol at Barry.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Don't even think about it. Get down off that horse. (*Barry, reluctantly, obeys*) Raise your hands high above your head, please. (*Barry does so*) Come forward.

Barry walks towards the bespectacled man.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Stop. How do you do? I'm Captain Feeney.

BARRY: Captain Feeney?

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Captain Feeney at your service.

BARRY: *The* Captain Feeney?

CAPTAIN FEENEY: None other. May I introduce you to my son, Seamus?

Barry turns to look at Seamus (Billy Boyle).

SEAMUS FEENEY: How do you do?

BARRY: How do you do.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: To whom do I have the honour of speaking?

BARRY: My name's Redmond Barry.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: How do you do, Mr Barry? And now I'm afraid we must get on to the more regrettable stage of our brief acquaintance. Turn around. And keep your hands high above your head, please.

Barry turns around. Seamus lightly frisks him, removes a bag of money from Barry's pocket, and tips the contents into his hand.

SEAMUS FEENEY: There must be 20 guineas in gold here, father!

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Well, well, well, you seem to be a very well set-up young gentleman, sir.

BARRY: (*turning to face Captain Feeney*) Captain Feeney, that's all the money my mother had in the world. Mightn't I be allowed to keep it? I'm just one step ahead of the law myself. I killed an English officer in a duel and I'm on my way to Dublin until things cool down.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: Mr Barry, in my profession we hear many such stories. Yours is one of the most intriguing and touching I've heard in many weeks. Nevertheless, I'm afraid I cannot grant your request. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll allow you to keep those fine pair of boots, which in normal circumstances I would have for myself. The next town is only five miles away, and I suggest you now start walking.

BARRY: Mightn't I be allowed to keep my horse?

CAPTAIN FEENEY: I should like to oblige you, but with people like us, we must be able to travel faster than our clients. Good day, young sir.

He stands aside. Barry walks past him, steps over the tree.

CAPTAIN FEENEY: You can put down your hands now, Mr Barry.

Barry does so, and keeps walking.

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